

# 薬屋

ひとりごと



Kusuriya no Hitorigoto 5

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5



# **Kusuriya no Hitorigoto**

– The Pharmacist's Monologue –

**- Volume 5 -  
Town 2**

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**[ Creative Novels ]**

# Chapter 1

## The Journey Back

Maomao and the others finally decided to return to the capital two days later.

They had seen off Uryuu who returned first. She felt that, for some reason, he looked a little more unambitious compared to the first time she saw him.

It wasn't something that concerned Maomao, so she went around town without care afterwards. She went shopping for things that couldn't be obtained anywhere else with the pocket money she had snatched off Rahan.

*Will I be rocking in the carriage on the way back too?* Maomao winced, but it seems they will be taking a different route on the way back. And so, they reached the riverside.

"I think we'll return by boat," Rahan said.

What Rahan said was that since the water level upstream has increased due to this rainy season, they could sail on a larger boat. He also said that the water will be gone by the time the dry season comes around though.

In terms of distance, it was more of a detour than going by horse, but while they can't rest on horseback, since they will be heading downriver, they can keep moving. The seasonal winds were also strong; it seems they will be moving quickly.

Conversely, he said that on top of the journey there being far, they needed to go upriver and the wind was going in the opposite direction, so it had been faster to go by carriage then.

(A ship huh.)

Rahan paid the sailor and boarded the boat. Everyone on board were slightly grim looking old men, but it was obvious given the standard for physical labour. They also had guards along with them, so she wanted to believe that they won't get sunk into the bottom of the river, intangible, deprived of all their possessions.

Seeing Maomao's eyes, Rikuson who was next to her laughed. "This ship is owned by a business partner of Rahan-sama."

"..."

So, was he saying that it's not dubious so she shouldn't worry about riding the boat?

Maomao went up the ship since it can't be helped.



"Oi, do you have motion sickness medicine?" Rahan said.

He was hugging a pail, pale-faced.

And Rikuson was a little distance away with a similarly pale face.

They were in a small cabin. This boat only had two, so the other passengers all had pale faces.

"You used it up when you vomited just then though," Maomao replied.

She had handed it over to him. He had already vomited it out. It didn't stay in long enough to be effective.

She had prepared motion sickness medicine as a precaution, considering that they will be travelling by carriage, but she didn't think that they would be used here.

Although they will arrive earlier since they will be moving without stopping, in other words, it meant they will be rocking continuously.

Even though he was fine in the carriage; to think that a boat was no good.

(It's not that I don't understand.)

Maomao slanted her body with the rocking of the boat.

Flash floods weren't few with the river that had suddenly risen in water level. In other words, the river was rough.

"Bleeuughhh."

Maomao turned her body to the opposite side this time. She felt gross; the cabin was

stuffy with the stink of vomit. She wanted to go out, but she could be thrown off the boat if she went out onto the deck, so she was told not to leave. There was also such a danger.

“Why are you not dizzy?” Rahan said reproachfully.

“Isn’t it because I don’t get dizzy from wine either?” Maomao replied.

Maomao’s complexion was unchanging. Rahan glared at her in vexation. This man, if she had to say it, wasn’t strong to wine.

The ship headed downriver. And when the river widened, they boarded a boat that was larger with another storey. They did that so they won’t drift into the great river while they advanced. They will repeat this several times until they get back home.

“I don’t want to ride any more ships!” Rahan said with a look of exhaustion, but he couldn’t get his hands on a carriage midway the journey, so they had no choice but to change boats.

It was the time they were transferring to their third boat.

There was a loud thud.

*What’s happened*, she thought. It turns out a person had fallen over on the harbour.

The sailor doubtfully roused them. The limp person was a man who was clad in a worn overcoat.

“Oi, bro, are you okay?” the sailor asked. He raised the man’s face, then groaned. “Ugh.”

The face must have been beautiful before. It revealed a distinct nose bridge and willowy brows. However, half of it was covered in pockmarks. As his features were round, the pockmarks created a ying-yang on the smooth skin.

The sailor flung the man away.

The man clambered to his feet.

“Excuse meee. May I board the ship?” The man formed a smile on his ugly face. She

could see a bag filled with money on his offered hand. He was still young. A youth who was around his mid-twenties.

“Y-you bastard! Don’t you have a weird sickness?” The sailor who had lifted him up was rubbing where he had touched the man.

Smiling, the man touched his ugly face.

“Yeah.” He nodded in assent and crouched down. Did he drop it when he fell? There was a scarf by his feet. The man picked it up and folded it in half into a triangle. He covered his face with that. At a glance, it looked like an eyepatch.

“I know. That. It’s smallpox, right!” the sailor cried.

Smallpox – a terrifying disease forms pustules all over your body. An infectious disease that is said to destroy even countries. It was extremely contagious; the sick can infect others by coughing and sneezing.

The man laughed with a lax smile and scratched his bumpy face. “Haha, it’s fine–. These are just scars. I got it once before, but I’m all lively right now. Come on come on!”

“The hell are you on about! Didn’t you just fall over just then! Don’t come over!”

At the sailor’s words, the people surrounding them distanced away.

Maomao squinted.

“What’s wrong?” Rikuson who had boarded the ship first came to ask her. It seems he had been carrying the luggage. He was truly diligent. Let’s just call him Gaoshun number two.

“That eyepatch man wants to board the ship, but the sailor is just rejecting him on the grounds that sick people can’t board,” she answered straightforwardly.

Rikuson looked at the youth with an “Hmm.” If that youth hid his pockmarks, he will be quite the lady-killer. Also, his tone was pretty frivolous.

“What’s inconvenient? Isn’t this boat free for anyone to board?” Rikuson asked.

"It looks like he has money, but he has pockmarks on his face, so the sailor suspects that he's sick," Maomao answered.

Rikuson squinted. "Is he really sick?"

"Ummm." From a distance, she had no idea. She could see pockmarks, but there was no pus. It's likely that what the youth was saying could be true. It seems that it's been a while even if he had gotten sick.

Then, speaking of why she was not telling the sailor that—

(It's a pain to get involved.)

It was just that.

Though, the man didn't look like he was giving up on boarding the ship. He was clinging to the sailor. "Please—. Let me board— Aren't you a bit of a meany—"

"Let go! Stop it, you'll spread your pox!"

"So mean. Discrimination! I'm lively as you can see!"

Normally, speaking of the beautiful man with facial scars, he had a shadow of his beauty, but it seems this guy didn't fall into that category. He had wound himself around the sailor's rugged legs, showing no signs of letting go.

The other sailors wanted to help their mate, but they didn't want to get infected with some strange disease so they watched from a distance.

At this rate, the ship won't leave.

As if he read Maomao's expression, Rikuson grinned at her. "You want the boat to leave soon, right?"

"..." She looked at the deck. Rahan was gazing at the blue sky while clutching onto the pail. It seems he couldn't obtain horses at this harbour too.

Maomao reluctantly descended the ship and went to stand before the runny-nosed eyepatch man who was clinging to the extremely annoyed sailor. "Excuse me," she said.

“Yes?”

When Maomao heard the reply that couldn't be taken as an affirmative, she took off the man's scarf.

She could see that the ugly pockmarks were from years ago. She looked at the eye on the side of the pockmarks. They didn't seem to focus. The size of the pupils was different on both eyes. He might have lost his vision on one eye.

“This man isn't sick. He has scars, but it shouldn't infect other people,” she said.

At least for smallpox.

She had no idea if he had anything else.

“...” Looking extremely opposed to it, the sailor gingerly took the man's money bag with his fingertips. He upturned it and money clattered to the floor. “How far do you want to go?”

“I want to go all the way to the capital! The capital, the capital!” The youth had the undisguised air of a country bumpkin. He made fists and shook them. “And so I made a lot of medicines!”

“Medicines?” It was Maomao who reacted to the man's words.

“Ahh, I'm amazing despite my looks!”

Saying that, he took out a large sack from his filthy overcoat. When he opened it, a characteristic stench wafted out from the opening.

Maomao reached in and picked out a pot. She opened the lid. It contained a salve. She didn't know its effect, but it has been made extremely conscientiously. The herbs had been thoroughly mashed and the manner of the kneading was of the perfect consistency. Of course, the quality was assured as the combination of the herbs was done so carefully.

Maomao looked at the man again.

The man smiled frivolously as he offered it to the sailor before him. “How about this medicine-? It's really good for seasickness.”



Of course, the sailor didn't need to buy such a thing.

"Stingy-. Isn't it fine to buy it?" The man passed money over to the sailor. It seems he can finally board the ship.

And then he looked at Maomao and grinned. "Thanks, you saved-saved me? I'll give you motion sickness medicine as thanks—"

He spoke like a kid. His outside didn't match with his inside.

"No, I won't get seasick, so I don't need that," she replied.

"Is that so-. That's too bad."

Just as the man was going to put away the medicine, she heard a loud "WAIT!!" from behind.

And it was Rahan who was running up with great vigour towards them from the boat.

"G-give me,... the motion sickness medicine," Rahan said, panting.

(Heard you loud and clear.)

Maomao returned to the boat as she thought that.

## Chapter 2

### Kokuyou

The name of the eyepatch man is Kokuyou(克用, Ke Yong). As she could imagine from his filthy appearance, he seems to be a traveller. Though, according to the person himself, he's a doctor—.

“Yeah, to put it simply, *you're cursed so scram*, was what I'd been told— how mean was that—”

It didn't sound mean at all. His tone reminded her of gossiping aunties – there were no bitter emotions in it whatsoever.

“I had been staying in the same place for the last couple of years. There was crop damage in the village from the locust plague last year—Because of that, the witch doctor suddenly started to cry curse—”

Kokuyou told her that he, being the newest newcomer in the village, got chased out. Doctors and witch doctors don't get along by nature. For Maomao, the idea of believing in unfounded things like curses was more stupid, but it's common sense for the general people. How irritating.

In opposed to his playful tone, his motion sickness medicine was very effective. To the point that the Rahan who couldn't let go of the pail could join in with their conversation. It could also be that it was more stable as the boat had increased in size, but Rahan was quite satisfied with it.

“Mhm. So you said that you'll be going to the capital to look for work,” Rahan said.

“Yeah, I guess. Something like that—” Kokuyou affirmed.

Rahan stroked his chin in acknowledgement. It looked like he was calculating something. Maomao nudged him with her elbow.

(Don't draw him in in a weird way.)

Kokuyou is weird, but if his skill as a doctor is attested, he can probably eat fine even in the capital. He just needs to cover his pockmarks though.

*I know*, Rahan looked at Maomao.

As he said that, he took out some paper from his breast pocket and started to write something on it.

“Come here if anything happens. I think I’ll be able to help somewhat,” he said.

What he had written down was a certain address of a house in the capital

Kokuyou accepted the paper and gave a carefree smile. “Ahahaha, I met nice people.”

(It’s not really with good intentions.)

Rahan has a calculative personality. This man only passed it over, thinking that there was some utility value, as little as there is, to it after all.

“By the way, how was last year’s locust plague?” Maomao asked.

Maomao wanted to grill him about his knowledge as a doctor, but she asked this first.

“Mm–. It wasn’t to the extent of eating tree roots and culling babies. Though, the children gradually got weaker from malnutrition yeah,” Kokuyou said with a look of sadness.

It’s easier to get sick with malnutrition. And the one who cures that would be the doctor. The village that chased out this man – how is it going now?

“I think it’ll be fine if there’s abundant harvest this year though—” he added.

*That’s not the case*, were Maomao’s thoughts, and it looks like this man had the same opinion.

“Until then, it’ll be greaaat if everyone in the village helps out one another yeah.”

The words *helps out one another* sounds good. However, there were requirements for that.

To the point of being able to help others, you'll need the liberty or something to do so. You ensure you have enough for yourself to eat and give away what you have left. The majority of help is something like this, and there's no meaning if you starve to death helping others. There are idiots who don't consider themselves and help others, but those are mere idiots who generally appear in stories.

If you think that doctors and pharmacists are saints or something, it's just an impression you get from their position. If they have no liberty, they cannot heal. It would be a total loss if you live frugally, get sick and infect everyone around you.

The village that chased out this man – even if they desired a new doctor, it would be too late.

No matter what happens, what's done has been done.



The boat journey ended a couple of days later. Maomao and the rest finally arrived in the capital. After alighting from the boat, the eyepatch man parted ways with them. He said that he had something else to do.

Rahan had tried to falsify his tipping when they got back, so they didn't lose a cent at all. Rikuson had laughed over that. Maomao really didn't understand this mild-mannered man.

When she was getting dropped off by carriage in front of the Rokushoukan, a kamuro raced up to her, mouth flapping as if she was complaining about something. It was Zuurin, the little girl who couldn't speak.

"What's wrong?" Maomao asked.

The little girl pulled Maomao's sleeves. She couldn't say anything even if she was asked. Maomao helplessly went along with her.

Zuurin threw open the doors of the pharmacy. Sazen was there, diligently sorting medicinal herbs right in the middle of the scattered bundles of paper. Despite having cleaned up since then, he looked like the wanderer from the time when he just arrived in the capital. His hair had grown and was loose and dishevelled. There were heavy bags under his eyes.

As Maomao was going away for a long period of time, she had taught him simple compounding. It seems that he was doing the work properly.

Sazen looked at her with vacant eyes.

“...I.” He stepped over the papers that had been scattered all over the floor, nearly stumbling, stopped in front of Maomao and grabbed her shoulders. “I didn’t hear about it! That it’ll get so busy!” he cried.

His appearance, nose dribbling, face gaunt, certainly told how her busy he was.

Maomao looked at the notebook that had been left on the low table.

It seems there was three times more work than usual.

The medicine she saved up was already used up.

“...yeah, I’m, kinda, sorry about that,” Maomao said.

Sazen finally gave a look of relief and hit the floor. She lightly prodded him to see if he was still alive. She could hear the faint sounds of snoring.

Can’t be helped. She covered him with a blanket. He’s in the way so she will have to carry him out later.

She took off her shoes and was about to enter the pharmacy when her back was pushed. She wondered what was up, and it turned out the brat was butting his head against Maomao’s back.

“What?” she said.

“It’s not *what*. You’re back so late,” the brat replied.

“I already told you it’s far away.”

It was Chou’u. The time Maomao went away, she left him for the head manservant, Ukyou, to look after him. Was he dissatisfied about something? He kept bumping his head on Maomao.

“You’re in the way.” Maomao grabbed his head.



“Ooo—w,” Chou’u’s exposed gums, the front teeth were half grown.

“By the way, what’s this?” Maomao asked him to ascertain the situation. Zuurin couldn’t explain, and the courtesans must be sleeping after their night work finished. The brothel was very silent.

“The old man, he slept over here, in this room— He somehow caught a cold,” Chou’u explained.

“Hmm.”

It was a little out of season, but that might be exactly why there wasn’t enough medicine. Maomao didn’t prepare that much cold medicine either.

“Then, what’s this?” Maomao looked at the papers that had been scattered everywhere. They weren’t notes, but letters. Here and there, tree branches accompanied them.

“Ahh, that. Half is from the usual big bro. But I don’t know about the other half,” Chou’u admitted.

Would the usual mean Jinshi? Certainly, the writing was familiar. And when she looked at the contents, they were things that made her tilt her head.

“Big bro is belated. To bring up weather as a topic. He normally doesn’t even use that,” he said.

“Did you just go and read it?” Maomao asked.

“I’m studying my words!”

He didn’t look like he was reflecting at all. Maomao lightly ground the brat’s head.

However, wouldn’t you send important letters more carefully? In reality, there was nothing but dry letters. Normally, he would send messages when he brought bothersome matters.

“Moreover, he brought it over despite knowing that you were away. Did you tell him

the exact day you were coming back?" Chou'u asked.

Looking at the numbers of messages she picked up, he had come over at least four times.

Then, speaking about the rest of the messages...

"?"

"Hahaha. It's amusing—these. It's those, right? The things you call love letters?" he said.

The branches that adorned it were seasonal flowers. The addressee's names were all different. But, looking at the contents, there was nothing but love letters.

Maomao tilted her head as she bundled the letters to the side, then started to compound what Sazen had left behind.



"I don't know who the hell they are, but it looks like they sniffed it out yeah," the madam said as she puffed her pipe. "That weirdo had come here to raise a fuss every time. Gosh."

It needn't be said who that weirdo is.  
It's that monocle old man.

"He yelled it out. That *I won't give you my daughter*," she added.

"..."

(Just what is this about?)

It happens to be a considerably familiar sight to have that weirdo yell out in front of the Rokushoukan. But, up until now, he only looked like a guest who got banned from entering the brothel.

The weirdo tactician is famous, but the Rokushoukan madam is also famous in the pleasure districts. Even that old man who has no enemies in the imperial court got chased out by the madam. That was how it was taken as.

The madam, being who she is, seemed to have warned him against using that bothersome wording for “daughter

(娘, musume. This word is normally used to mean ‘daughter’, but can also refer to ‘a typical maiden/girl’). The old man had some way or other abided by her words faithfully, but it seems he broke that promise this time.

Speaking of the reason...

“It was truly a sight when he butted heads with the masked patron, ya know,” the madam said.

The letters from Jinshi that was left in her room had been overly vague and hard to understand. It seems it was that kind of message.

“That’s right. There were sparks flying–. Fufu, it was amusing–.” Pairin showed up without any preamble and added to the conversation. She gave a smirk that made Maomao feel uncomfortable.

(What went awry?)

When she put the news together, she got this.

It seems Jinshi, having made some mistake, had proposed marriage to Maomao. And then, the weirdo tactician who knew of it repeatedly went to the Rokushoukan and yelled *that* out. From that, there were rumours that there is a relative of the weirdo here.

When that happened, a portion of daredevil officials who are filled with the desire for promotion caught sound of it, and in the manner of aiming for the horse first to shoot the commander, sent love letters to Maomao.

“And so, they brought letters over. They passed it to the kamuro without knowing who the daughter is. Everyone was stumped and just dumped the letters all in the room. Ah. Occasionally there were also guests who came to buy so we did something bad though,” Pairin said.

“I guess so. It seems we sold two newcomer virgins for high,” the madam said.

The madam was full of deception. Maomao wondered what would happen if their lies got busted, but until then, that could be training for the newcomers to chain men down

skilfully.

Maomao lightly felt her lips, and let go.

(What am I thinking about?)

As a certain noble's face appeared in her mind, Maomao decided to continue working.

# Chapter 3

## Treasure Hunt

“It looks like spring has finally come for Maomao.” Pairin hid her mouth behind her sleeve and laughed. Her hair was a little messy and her collar was slovenly as if she had just woken up. But then, it was common for her to dress slovenly on purpose though.

Maomao entered the pharmacy very naturally and picked up the letters she had put to the side. She put those with Jinshi’s handwriting in a different letterbox and left the rest. Among those five letters, two had the same handwriting; the rest were different. If she were to consider it normally, it would mean that the letters had come from four people.

(How whimsical.)

It was likely that they didn’t know Maomao’s name. Not even her face. That’s why they had passed it over to the kamuro. They must have thought that the weirdo’s tactician’s daughter hasn’t taken a guest.

It wasn’t an unusual story to hear that the girl in the brothel is the daughter of a big shot. This is the pleasure district where big shots show up as guests for services that can make children. And so, there are courtesans who calculate and give birth without abortion. And what would turn out of it when they show the big shot the child they had given birth to and say that “This is your child”?

One portion would believe the words of the courtesan and raise the child. Even if the child is treated as an illegitimate child, there are still ways to aid that. If the child is male, if it goes smoothly, there are also cases where they could take over.

However, the rest would not recognise that child as theirs and reject them.

It wasn’t unusual to hear the stories of girls lying on top of a cushion dead from venereal diseases and epidemics who had once insisted that they were the bastards of the previous emperor. But then, while the current emperor is a different matter,



being the illegitimate child of the previous emperor is a story that is impossible to believe – Maomao knew that very well from the circumstances of the inner palace.

(It would be better if they take it as nonsense.)

It was because the weirdo tactician had personally proclaimed it that it became such a bothersome thing.

Speaking of why that weirdo did that at such a belated time, she had some knowledge of it.

Maomao opened the letterbox and took out a scented letter.

The handwriting was Jinshi's. However, she was curious about the writing style; it was more unpolished than usual. The writing was strangely awkward. Normally, his writing would be elegant like his appearance, and yet the characters were crooked in various places, and there happened to be weird empty spaces.

From that, there was another thing she was bothered about.

(What could this be?)

Normally, Jinshi's letters would be folded three times and wrapped in cloth when it was brought over. However, it was a little different this time. There were strange creases of the same length on four sides of the square-shaped paper.

Maomao tilted her head. The creases were all the same. It was an unnatural shape from folding a letter.

She stuck her head out from the doorway of the pharmacy. She located Chou'u who was playing with the kamuro and beckoned him over.

"What's wrong?" Chou'u asked.

"Did you fold this for fun?" she asked

You can make boxes and flowers by folding square shaped paper. You require high-quality paper to make that, so it wasn't something done by commoners.

At the Rokushoukan, there were times where they had folded paper in place of flowers

to decorate, but you don't do that with letters. If there was anyone who would do that, it would have to be the brat's doing, Maomao thought.

"Freckles, are you doubting me?" Chou's asked.

"Who else would do that aside from you?" Maomao replied.

"No wayyy. It wasn't me! Maybe for other people's letters, but if I don't treat the masked big bro's things with respect, the hag will get scary!"

*That's true*, Maomao nodded.

"It was like that from the start." Chou'u left with a rough snort. His kamuro follower copied him.

*What is this supposed to mean?* Maomao tilted her head and folded the paper in line with the creases.

"..."

It made an even four-sided shape. She scrutinised the shape that looked like the tip of a small blade. Then she noticed something strange. She unfolded the paper again. And then refolded it.

The characters were crooked exactly where the folds touched.

(Don't tell me.)

Wasn't Jinshi's writing crooked in places because of the fact that it had been written on the folds? The paper had been folded not after he had written the letter but beforehand.

Maomao stacked the four letters and interposed them.

When she stacked two of the letters, the radical of the crooked character overlapped with another crooked character.

(...I see.)

She folded the four letters and stacked them. This created a pinwheel shape. And then, the hidden message was revealed.

The reason there were crooked characters. It was because he had written it on top of this shape where the four sheets of paper had been stacked first. He unfolded it, and to conceal it like it was nothing, he turned them to dry letters. The strange empty spaces would also have to be from that.

What he had written there was...

Maomao left the pharmacy and went behind the Rokushoukan. There were deep peach coloured flowers, lily magnolias, growing there.

Maomao looked at its roots.

The earth was slightly disturbed. That was the only place that didn't have weeds.

She picked up a stick and dug up the soil. A box wrapped in cloth came up.

“ ... ”

She brushed away the soil and stripped off the cloth. It was a wooden box. She lifted the lid. There were mushrooms like things inside. Its name is velvet antler (鹿茸, Rokujou). It looks like a mushroom but is actually deer antlers.

It was a high-class item that is used as an analeptic medicine.

(What's going to happen if I didn't notice this?)

Maomao's lips drew an arc as she knitted her brows.

Her happiness won't abate before the precious crude medicine, but at the same time, she got a little sullen that he had hidden it in such a place where it might not be found.

She got sullen, but his smiling face appearing in her mind expecting that she would be able to find it was vexing.

(Even so, velvet antler is...)

*Did he choose it knowing its effects?* Maomao tilted her head slightly.

Maomao covered up the hole and returned to the pharmacy while stroking the box.

She was angry that she was somehow seen through, but the velvet antler had no sin.



"It seems that girl has finally returned," Basen said as he set down the supplementary documents on the table.

As Jinshi flipped through the ludicrous documents of the topic in hand, he listened in on that. The pharmacist of the pleasure district had gone out for around one month. Speaking of what word he got, it had been rumours at most.

Since the personage who took her along was that girl's adopted brother, he could imagine what kind of matter it was for, but they had been gone for longer than he expected.

To the point where he couldn't resist playing a little prank on her.

In response to Jinshi, Basen stared at him.  
It was a gaze that vaguely resembled Gaoshun.

"What?" Jinshi asked.

"No. You look happy," Basen replied.

"Not at all."

Seeing the mountains of piled up documents on the table, there was no way he could be happy. Moreover, more than half of those had insubstantial content. He could just say that this was harassment.

Concerning that person who was harassing him, Jinshi could only laugh though.

"It's from the Tactician-dono," he said.

The majority of the meaningless documents were sent from the one and only weirdo in the imperial court.

Jinshi had been regularly harassed in such a manner since a long while ago. Occasionally, there would be an increased number of strange ornaments in the office, grease smeared in various places in the room, but he had tolerated it for the time

being. He wondered how that man got inside but it shouldn't be an issue since he didn't try to leave anything important when he leaves his seat. Probably.

He looked at Basen. The gaze was strangely painful. It wasn't as mature as Gaoshun's, but the man's preaching look strangely resembled his father.

"What are you planning to do with it?" Basen asked.

"What about?"

"The incident where you spoke to the Tactician-dono the other day."

Jinshi thought that the reason the harassment increased was because of that. Basen must also know too.

"It should be fine. Better than getting talks from all directions," he replied.

"Isn't the other party too terrible?" Basen said.

Speaking of what Basen was talking about:

From Jinshi's position, he was pressured by everyone around him that it was about time for him to take a consort.

He was almost pushed to the daughters of high officials, talks about a princess from a foreign country coming in had also come up. Among those, there was also the talks of having an emperor's consort from the inner palace bestowed to him.

"...it's perfect as a diversion," Jinshi said.

Speaking of what diversion:

Normally, the only woman in Jinshi's palace was his nanny Suiren. However, there had been newcomer maids who stand in front of his palace unnaturally. Though they were maids, they were all gaudy women doused with the intense stench of perfume.

Even during work, the number of court ladies visiting had increased. They fluttered their eyelashes more than usual, and come closer carrying things with moist eyes. They carry heavy items unnaturally, drop that and pull up their skirts so he can't progress on his work.



There were a lot of amorous glances before, but he had been treated as a eunuch then. From that, there had been those who kept a step back, so it was good, and yet-

“For what reason do I have this scar?” Jinshi subconsciously stroked the scar on his right cheek.

“Jinshi-sama, please don’t say such a thing,” Basen said.

“My bad.”

Jinshi had got this scar from neglecting to dodge. About that, he didn’t regret; rather he liked it. However, as Jinshi was injured, Basen got beat up by Gaoshun. Contrary to Jinshi’s sunniness, Basen was quite depressed.

Recently, Jinshi thought that Basen had finally broken through it, but the other man was sighing more than usual this time. It looks like he has more new worries again, but he won’t talk to Jinshi. If Jinshi pressed him, he might talk, but he probably didn’t need to go that far. Basen must have a pessimistic nature like his father.

Such a Basen was putting the rejected documents into the collection basket.

“Shouldn’t there be a better method? Medicine may be medicine but it could also be strong poison,” Basen said.

“That’s also true,” Jinshi agreed.

The method Jinshi used to change the persistent attitudes of everyone around him.

“Even bringing up the topic of his daughter to the Tactician-dono in front of such a large audience,” Basen continued.

Jinshi who was blasé towards everyone had never asked anyone out. From there, upon declaring that the tactician has a daughter, if it looks like Jinshi was interested in her, how would it turn out?

At least, its effect was so perfect to shut up the flies. The harassment had increased in turn though.

“Even if it’s just a pretence, it’ll turn into a troublesome issue,” Basen added.

“...” Jinshi wavered, wanting to correct Basen’s words, but kept silent.

Instead of that, he asked him something else. “Hey, if the person you kissed had no reaction whatsoever, what would you think?”

“Ki-kiss!!” Basen widened his eyes, face pure red. The documents in his arms scattered over the floor. “I-if you do such a thing, how are you going to take responsibility!?”

Seeing his foster brother slam the table, Jinshi got a superiority complex of sorts. At least, it didn’t complicate to this point – he was relieved.

“First, you have to start with an exchanging of letters...” Basen said.

“You start with letters?” Jinshi asked.

“Yes! Isn’t that the correct interaction!” the other man insisted.

No, it shouldn’t be. Not for that.

Jinshi, before Gaoshun remembered and meddled into his matters, considered what he should do about the man’s son.

## Chapter 4

### The Hanging Woman (1)

That delivery arrived when there were green buds on the slender irises. The cart in front of the Rokushoukan was piled with jute sacks.

The cargo was all for Maomao.

“Hmm, the quality ain’t bad.” The madam arrogantly helped herself with inspecting the contents. The jute sacks were filled with wheat. They were the share she had won from the bet during the incident in the paper village. She had demanded rice, but wheat was good enough. It’ll just a little bothersome to turn it into flour.

As far as she could see, as the madam had said, the quality of the wheat wasn’t bad. Maomao picked up several grains and peeled off the husk. They were still damp. These had to be freshly harvested wheat from this year.

Could this be the defiance of the other party? It would be better to set these aside for a bit longer before they get ground into flour. Since Maomao had only got those people to just deliver it to her as earnings, she won’t get angry with this much.

She took just one sack to make porridge. Let’s sell the rest to the miller. She had no plans to store it forever, not at the least.

“I’ll introduce you to a good miller,” the crone said, sympathising with Maomao.

“I want to leave out the commissioning though.”

Still, to not get taken light of by the buyer, Maomao decided to go along with the madam’s words since it would be smarter to go through her. She had those people deliver it to the front of the Rokushoukan as she had been intending for that from the start.

The cat maomao was very interested in the wheat sacks. It was scratching its claws on it. Since it was in heat recently, Maomao had to keep a watchful eye out for it so it doesn’t have a lot of kittens.

Maomao, grimacing, pulled maomao away from the bag. The cat resisted, thrashing its legs around.

(Oh?)

There was some box hidden inside the sacks. She opened it. There was good quality paper inside.

Maomao picked a sheet up and felt it.

“How nice is this. It’s the first time I’ve seen such thin paper.” That was yet another remark the madam gave out. As the crone had said, the paper was thin and transparent. The colours were also vivid, coloured peach and chartreuse. Not just that, it was scattered with flower petals.

“It looks like a new product.”

As they are purveyors to the imperial court, they can make stylish things. It could be called paper at best and paper still. It must be from the quack doctor’s family.

maomao waved its forelegs, eyes round. It looks like it wanted to sharpen its claws on that paper, but she won’t let it do that. Maomao flung maomao away, then shut the box of paper and was going to take it back to her dilapidated shack—  
—she fixed her thought and showed it to the madam.

“How much do you want to buy?” Maomao asked

“Oh, are you selling what you simply received?” the madam countered.

“It’s fine if you don’t want it though,” she said.

“Don’t you really... resemble someone?”

(I am the fruit of the crone’s teachings.)

She picked out of a sheet of the paper that had been pressed with flowers and showed it to the crone.

If it’s paper that elegant gentleman would like, it would be suited for use for the letters for honoured guests. Since there aren’t few people who ask about the quality of the

courtesans among the guests. This kind of stationery shouldn't be bad.

(where should I put this away?)

If she carelessly left it somewhere, Chou'u would probably use it for his scribbles. For the time being, she considered putting in the back of the medicine shelves, when she heard the neigh of a horse. What's that, she thought, and there was a face she recognised outside.

"What's wrong, Basen-sama?"

"I'll explain later. Get on now!" he said, and forced Maomao onto the back of the horse.

(He's full of troubles lately huh.)

Maomao felt sorry for the sweaty horse as she wound her arms around Basen's belly to stay on.



The place they got to was an estate in the northeast of the capital. She knew it from a considerably powerful family from the height of the building and the wideness of the land.

"Where is this place?" She asked.

"...Jinshi-sama's villa," Basen replied.

And then he sneaked a glance to the side.

Maomao followed his gaze. There was yet another impressive estate.

"And that place?"

"That's Uryuu-sama's estate."

*I'll explain the details inside,* Basen went through the door.



Since it's Jinshi's villa, of course, she had to assume that the owner was around. It went without saying. He was there. Quite surely.

Jinshi was slouching on the couch, continuously looking out the window. His face was, more than tired, looked gloomy.

What's up?

"You're here?" Jinshi turned towards her, so she lowered her head.

"Long time no see," he said.

"Long time no see, Jinshi-sama."

"Ahh, it's a rush, but let's move to the main topic." Jinshi looked out the window again. Uryuu's estate was there. Basen was looking at it just then.

"Last night, there was a banquet at Uryuu-dono's estate," he said.

It seems Jinshi had still stayed in this villa that was closer.

"I was told that it was to deepen friendship, but it was also a celebration of his daughter's birthday," he continued.

"Birthday?" Maomao asked.

At the words *daughter*, she thought of Consort Riishu, but this would have to mean her half-sister.

Normally, commoners don't attach much importance to birthdays. One year from birth, and then a year from then on. Celebrating birthdays for the sake of it wasn't absent but it was done by a minority.

(Did he get offered marriage talks?)

Even if it's merely for form's sake, Uryuu's daughter would have a reason to come out to centre stage in the form of a celebration. And if she were to meet Jinshi there, it could lead to that topic.

If it were to be Consort Riishu's older sister, her age would be suitable.

To think about it normally, this way would be more natural than Consort Riishu's bestowal.

Maomao had no idea what the person called Uryuu currently thought about Consort Riishu, but it wasn't strange as an official for him to sell his daughter to Jinshi.

What's up with *that* then? About Jinshi's gloomy face.

Even though it wasn't that Jinshi was eager or that he was unable to decline it properly.

"Uryuu's daughter, last night, committed suicide," he said.

As Jinshi's words, Maomao's gapped open.

"...Did you reject her that cruelly?" she asked.

A young maiden might get shocked from getting rejected by Jinshi. Even though she thought that he did that quite well up until now, did he make some blunder somewhere?

"No, I didn't reject her or anything," he said.

"Poor thing. She was dropped to the earth by the celestial maiden," Maomao whispered, casting her eyes down.

"I told you it's nothing like that!" Jinshi said in a slight fluster and dropped the documents on the table.

*Oh is that all*, Maomao looked at that.

Written on those documents were the details of the time where Consort Riishu got assaulted in the capital the other day. "This is..."

"It turns out that there was intelligence that the one who pulled the strings behind Consort Riishu's assault was her older half-sister," he answered.

"And so, last night, she was coerced to reveal it," Maomao said.



“...that’s right,” Jinshi said awkwardly.

If she had committed suicide over the fact that she had been coerced to reveal the truth, it would be most awkward.

However, even if she’s the half-sister, if she was trying to inflict harm to a flower of the inner palace, she certainly wouldn’t be able to escape capital punishment.

“Even if they are half-sisters, by her blood sister huh,” Maomao remarked.

*She really has a harsh life*, Maomao thought about Consort Riishu. It would be cruel to tell the person herself.

(Ah, is it with that?)

Was Basen that agitated because it was related to Consort Riishu?

However, what does calling Maomao have a relation to this then?

Jinshi stared at Uryuu’s estate. “I was told Consort Riishu’s half-sister had hung herself.”

“Yes,” she said.

“And that everyone in the banquet saw it.”

“Yes.”

That was a drastic way to do it. Does that mean she had been in quite a conspicuous place?

The reason Jinshi had summoned Maomao there would be:

“She had hung herself in a place that can be seen from the banquet. And then, while they called for everyone to help, she disappeared from the place.”

Maomao gave a start.

“At the place where she was thought to have hung herself, there were only shoes left.

Her corpse wasn't there. There was only a suspended rope. There were signs of the rope having been cut."

And then, while everyone was desperately looking for the half-sister, what they found was...

"The burnt remains of her body. The torch fire had spread," Jinshi finally said.

"..."

(Too much of a bad aftertaste.)

She also got the reason for Jinshi's sad face.

With this, even if they accuse the half-sister of the crime, they couldn't accuse her, right? On the contrary, couldn't this be material that could also drive Jinshi to a corner?

Honestly, Maomao was concerned about what kind of attitude Jinshi would come with today. She was sorry, but for Maomao, it was easier to be preoccupied with other matters.

If it's this, it seems they will be as usual.

"And so, is that why you called me?" Maomao asked.

He didn't know the truth about the matter of the suicide. And above all, was it truly a suicide?

Looks like he wanted to tell her to investigate it.

(Even if you ask what should you do.)

Yes – there was nothing to say aside from that.

Maomao nodded and looked out the window.

# Chapter 5

## The Hanging Woman (2)

Maomao stayed over at Jinshi's villa for the night. The funeral will be held at Uryuu's estate.

Normally, it would be a more private affair, but as the incident had been so overblown in public, they couldn't hold the funeral service quietly either. Jinshi will also be attending the service.

She looked at Uryuu's estate from Jinshi's. There were women clad in white going inside. Seeing how they were wearing black veils, they had to be mourners. They arranged quite a number of them, Maomao saw. Around the house, servants adorned with flower wreaths were greeting the attendees who showed up with their heads bowed.

Maomao then looked at the clothes that had been given to her as well. White outfit and white veil. Mourner clothes.

"Honestly, there isn't a job that suits you least."

It was Basen who said that, but Maomao agreed with him entirely. Mourners lament and cry for the dead. There was no way it suited her.

It turns out Maomao will be a mourner employed by Jinshi. As he employed several, she was going to hide among them.

(I suppose that's the case.)

Uryuu knew Maomao's face. It was just perfect that she could hide it.

There were paper money and models of daily necessities on the table.

"Even though you're rich, you're not using the real things?" she asked.

"Isn't that what the nouveau rich do?" Jinshi countered.

That was natural. Furthermore, it was bad taste to do that at another person's funeral.

Even so, the emperor's relative mourning the dead like so didn't feel entirely strange. As the emperor himself is the heaven's messenger according to the people, he is a person of respect from the start.

The quality of the paper money was very good. Was it made by the quack's village? She thought it would be a waste to burn it, but she shouldn't be stingy here.

She glanced at Jinshi. He looked somewhat gloomy. Occasionally, he squeezed his fist, nails digging in.

Normally, Maomao would be more involved in it though. *It's just right to be indiscrete when you're involved*, she thought.

"Well then, shall we head off?"

From Jinshi's words, Maomao slipped herself into the group of people clad in white who were waiting outside. She followed from the back of the group of mourners who trailed behind Jinshi, Basen, and the guards.

Even though the distance was a mere eye's distance, he had specially prepared a carriage. It would be faster to walk, but it seems this will set a bad example for others.

Maomao, with the rest of the subordinates who didn't board the carriage, headed towards Uryuu's estate on feet. There was a curtain in front of the estate to check the people who were entering the estate. Jinshi's carriage would pass through it quickly, but it seems this group clad in white would require various procedures.

The reception checked the number of mourners and passed them a wooden tag. There was a number written on the tag.

"Come on, move it."

The mourners abided by those words.

Uryuu's estate was a building based around a water garden.

When they first went through the stone paved pathways, there was water flowing on both sides. Willows swayed refreshingly here and there. It was dotted with red pillars

and yellow roofed gazebo. Lotus leaves floated on the expansive pond, where the water occasionally rippled.

(Fish?)

She peeked at the water's surface. And saw something flapping their mouths. They were black, she couldn't see them properly, but they seem to be koi fish.

It seems these bottom feeders had approached from hearing people's footsteps. Looks like they are reliably fed by people.

"Oi, move it."

From the words of the man who came to lead Maomao, she went silent and returned to the group of white-clad people.

There were also people gathered in front of the estate. A different group of mourners were crying.

There were many faces she had seen before among the condolence callers. Even if Maomao didn't remember them, she thought that she had seen them before when she was serving at the imperial court. *Again, I can't let my face be seen*, she thought and wore the veil again.

Jinshi had prepared five mourners with Maomao included altogether. However, there were over fifty mourners who had already cried.

They might have been brought over by the other condolences callers, but she couldn't help feeling that it was a little too much. It was the work of women to raise their voices and cry, but she felt they were holding back a little this time. If they didn't do so, it would be loud, so it couldn't be helped. *They really are crying for work*, she ended up thinking.

And so, Maomao was obliged to cry lousily with them, but she was relieved that there were those who were worse than her. As the mourners had been assembled from within the capital, as expected, there would be a bad mourner mixed in as well. As her voice still had some shyness to it, she might have just started this job not so long ago.

During the drawn-out funeral, as if it was tough to keep crying, occasionally, the front

would swap over with those at the back. In other words, by swapping to cry, they must be preserving their energy. With the mourners placing an importance on efficiency, there would be the question of whether the dead would come to mind it, but Maomao thought that there'll be nothing to it as they were dead to start off with. It can't be helped at these women were working to eat.

When Maomao was behind the next in turn, someone tugged her sleeves. She wondered what it was. It was the man who had guided Maomao just then.

"I'll explain, so come."

Maomao pulled back as she was being told. It was just thick with foliage; it was perfect as a hiding spot. With this many mourners, it would be no problem if there was one less person.

"My apologies for before," the man said.

"It's okay," she said.

Towards Maomao, it would have to be a haughty manner of speaking. She didn't really mind it; she thought it was normal, but him taking a friendly attitude like so could also probably mean that he knew of Maomao's lineage.

Maomao decided to hear the circumstances for the time being. She had heard the details from Jinshi and Basen first, it was greatly different to have someone who had been at the actual scene.

"I was also present at the banquet," the man said and smoothly pointed to the building that could be seen from the top of the trees. It was a tower with a four-fold roof. It was tall so it could be seen even with obstacles. "She had hung down from the top of that place."

If she had hung herself at such a place, she had quite some guts. After trying to harm her younger half-sister, would it be bold that she committed suicide?

"It's like she was showing off."

Considering Jinshi's gloominess, she also gave a bitter smile. Him acting in such a way, meant that Jinshi and the others cannot condemn Uryuu.

It was fundamental that parents would take up the daughter's misconduct, but the victim this time was also an actual daughter as well. Even if she is a consort who entered the inner palace, if she is forced against accidents from the family up until now, it is something she is forced to avoid.

(This would be troubling huh.)

Previously, there was also the incidence where the perpetrator had been Consort Rifa's head maid. That ended with the head maid just returning home with Consort Rifa's kindness.

Honestly, any of those matters weren't things that could be settled in a better way. It just that there could be various issues if the point of compromise was left within that range of pardon.

Even in regards to the Shi Clan, exempting the children and those were already left the family, the rest of the clan getting executed was also a compromise that the emperor and Jinshi had decided on.

They should squeeze more if they want to squeeze out the pus, but if you try to hollow out more of the wound, the system of the country could also collapse. Even if it was from the perspective of a layperson, Maomao thought that it was the right decision.

As for Jinshi, even if the daughter were to die, it was important to clarify whether there was a ringleader or not. And Maomao was here to investigate that.

"It was a mysterious sight. A woman in white clothing dangling from the topmost storey of that tower. It was like she was floating," the man said.

At that point, Maomao got a question. "Like she was floating, you say? As she was wearing white clothing, normally, isn't that something that can't be seen from such a distance?"

"About that, as it was her birthday celebration, the tower was brightly lit up. The garden had been lit up in various places."

If it's like that, she understood.

Maomao took out a sheet of paper from her bosom. It was the map of Uryuu's estate

that had been given to her beforehand. As it was another person's house, it wasn't drawn in much detail, but she tapped the tower where the suicide had taken place with her finger.

"Well then, so what is this about the one who hung here being the daughter?" she asked.

"She was wearing the same clothes as the celebration. A white dress and red sash," the man answered.

"And the possibility of it being someone else?"

The man was silent in regards to that. He only averted his gaze and whispered. "Can you say that right to my face?"

In regards to this, he could only be dumbfounded. "Besides, the body who fell to the bottom of the tower was the daughter's."

"So Uryuu-sama had confirmed that," Maomao said.

"That's the case," the man affirmed.

And speaking of what Jinshi got Maomao to investigate something amid that, he was really talking about the absurd.

"So you're saying that her body was found at the bottom of the tower," she said.

"That's right. The body was crushed and burned. There were cut bits of rope around her neck."

It was a given that she would be crushed if she fell from such a height.

"When everyone saw the hanging woman, they all ran towards the tower. However, what they found when they reached the top was only some cut rope. And when they went down to look, the body was there," he continued.

"Was there anyone who saw the moment the body fell?" Maomao asked.

"The servants saw. However, no matter how hard they looked, they couldn't find the



body.”

It was because the exact moment when the body fell from the tower, they saw a strange light. The watchfire had been burning the clothes the body was wearing.”

“So the servants headed to the place where the body fell, right?” Maomao asked.

“That’s right. They said they couldn’t see as it was from a distance. They timidly told that it was like she had been floating airily,” he replied.

(Airily?)

The half-sister had been wearing white. The man said that she was like a ghost.

“Which reminds me, I was told that it was distasteful that there were a lot of mourners today.”

(Well yeah.)

It is distasteful to have fifty women just to cry.

“It’s about time they’re moving so I’ll be back,” the man said and went somewhere.

Maomao returned to the files of mourners with an innocent look.

The coffin was decorated with flowers, flames leapt around it. There was a young man there, feeding fake money into the fire. Aside from that, there were imitations of clothes and paper flowers that were being burned. That way, was a customary practice where you send things to the world of the dead. As this was done by relatives, could that be the older brother? The half-brother, in the case of Consort Riishu?

They moved to the next place. As the women walking closely together in groups with eyes suppressing tears, she ended up stepping on the dress of the mourner in front of her many times. When Maomao gave off a small distance to walk, she stepped on a different woman’s dress with all her might and someone fell flashily. There was a clatter. A numbered tag had fallen. Maomao picked it up and handed it to the fallen woman.

“Thank you. I was so close to being stuck here,” the woman who had fallen over said.

Her voice was still young, but she must be working as a mourner like this for income.

They shuffled along, and the koi fishes once again gathered with their mouths flapping. Speaking of how energetic they were for food, the moment a leaf fell into the surface of the water, there were splashes.

(Are they fed properly, these guys?)

They had to be fed, but there would have to be quite a lot as the pond was too big.

Suddenly, Maomao looked in the direction of the tower.

There was a pond around the tower too.

Then, she looked at mourners again.

Maomao took out the tag she was given.

(So it's something like that.)

Maomao curled her lips lightly and entered the centre of the ranks, and accidentally stepped on the mourners' hems flashily.



Even at the next place, the work of a mourner had ended.

The man who was Jinshi's messenger turned up, but after he told her only a single word, she soon returned to her post.

As Maomao heard a lousy crying voice beside her, she gave a terrible ham performance of a cry, but midway she skipped out and was poked by another mourner beside her.

The mourners who had finished their work were guided by the servants and left the estate.

And in the place of the tent, they would return the tag but...

"Hey, is it okay if I take a look?" It was Basen who was waiting in front of the tent.

Face severe, he was looking at the mourner who had taken out her tag.

The mourners around them exchanged glances, and mysteriously looked at the mourner Basen had called out to.

The number on the mourner's tag was the same as Maomao's.

And then...

Maomao approached that mourner and tore off her thick veil.

And there, on her face, was gaudy make-up unbecoming of a mourner.

# Chapter 6

## Something Twisted

Sitting on the chair with a terribly sulky expression was the mourner with the gaudy makeup – Uryuu’s supposedly dead daughter.

There was some fear in her attitude, but beyond that, she was acting like one who did nothing wrong.

With her funeral already over, they moved over to Jinshi’s estate so no one will find them. Maomao secretly peeked at them from the corner of the room.

The men around her looked like they wanted to escape. It was Uryuu and his son. Jinshi and Basen both watched them, looking stunned and brows twitching respectively.

“So, in other words, am I not mistaken that you tried to plot a cover-up?” Jinshi said.

The reason Jinshi phrased his statement as a question was because he remembered Uryuu’s daughter’s face properly. Uryuu had three children. He only had this displeased woman and Consort Riishu as his daughters. It was about who the dead girl had been.

For that part, for dead bodies and such, they can pick up as many as they want. By going to the slums, there would be young girls and such who would have collapsed and all. For that part, Maomao didn’t want to think that they had purposely prepared one.

They might have crushed the body and burnt it as a cover-up, which was why they had hung it out in such a conspicuous place for people to see.

“Are you working together?” he asked.

Uryuu had determined the dead body to be his daughter. That was how it turned out.

However, it was his son standing next to him who protested. Maomao didn’t remember

his name; it was U something. “What in the world is this about? We pretty much saw the hanging when it was discovered with you people. How can we even possibly plot a cover-up?” the son countered.

In other words, he was saying that it was impossible for them to hang the body from the tower and burn it so it can’t be identified. It wasn’t that they weren’t displaying a bit of arrogance before the imperial brother, but they must be quite impatient.

Certainly, if they don’t explain *that*, the talks won’t proceed. For high handed people, this would be the part where they would brandish their authority, but unfortunately, Jinshi’s personality wasn’t like that.

Of course, Maomao had already explained *that* to Jinshi.

Jinshi took out a box of joss papers. Then he set it next to another box a messenger had brought over from the pleasure district. It was the high-quality paper she got from the quack’s hometown. “The paper looks to be quite good for joss paper, but you have also got your hands on this, right?” he asked.

It was thin and soft paper. The size of a sheet was quite large – three *shaku* on each side.

“When you liken this to clothes, you can make a simple doll out of it,” Jinshi said.

That was what had hung down from the tower. It had been made to resemble a dead body.

“Even if it was a dummy, how did it disappear, you ask? With that, what happens if someone saw it? It was in such a conspicuous place, you know,” the son said.

“That, would be this.” Jinshi twisted to paper thinly into a thread. It’s quite sturdy when you tug it; it won’t rip. However, if one drop of water gets onto it, it’ll easily tear.

The part where they got people to investigate the tower again – there were scraps of ripped paper on the top of the pillar. There were water stains on it.

“The paper doll was hung up by two threads. You make one thread thin, make it easy to soak. If it was made in a way where it had been cut beforehand, it would be a matter of time. And speaking of how you get it wet, you can just use ice,” Jinshi explained.

When the ice melts, the paper thread will snap. It had been planned that when the second thread breaks, the doll will fall from the tower.

Hearing that, Uryuu's son exhaled. "Then where could that doll have fallen? If you look for it and find it, you'll still know but—"

"The doll has not been found. Since it's already been disposed of."

The servants said that the doll looked like it was floating when it fell. And then, that they couldn't find it when they scoured the place where it fell.

When Maomao tried to ask about the details of that place, she was told that it was beside the pond.

"I was told that the servant said that the koi fish went crazy."

The bottom feeder koi fish show up when just a leaf falls onto the water, mistaking it as food.

If it's like that, what would happen if the paper doll fell?

A large number of koi fish will peck at it. The doll had probably disintegrated in the water.

And then, they discovered the burnt body in a completely different place.

"There were a lot of guest carriages around the estate. You won't be able to get your daughter out even if you tried. That's why you gathered mourners for the funeral," Jinshi said.

Just like how Maomao had covered her face with a veil to be unrecognisable, the daughter had worn white and covered her face with a veil as well. That was why there had been a randomly lousy mourner there.

And then, Maomao had surprised her in order to ascertain whether she was really Uryuu's daughter or not.

While they were moving, Maomao had stepped on that woman with the lousy crying voice and another woman's skirts and made them fall. And then, she would approach

the lousy one and show her the wooden tag she was carrying and say:

“Did you drop *this*? If you lose it, you won’t be able to leave the estate.”

If she was wrong, she was going to go to the other person who fell. However, that woman said nothing and took Maomao’s wooden tag.

Uryuu’s daughter had cast her eyes down. She was pouting.

It didn’t look like Uryuu and his son were going to say anything more. They were silent. And while Maomao thought that was all they would do, Uryuu took a step forward.

“Everything is my fault,” he said, and slowly lowered his head.

Seeing that, the son moved forward. “Father did nothing. I did it. Misidentifying the body too, I had been upset.”

“No, it was me!”

(It’s fine either way.)

It might be beautiful that parent and child were sticking up for each other, but the main issue, the daughter, was sending amorous glances towards Jinshi. Even though *he* won’t fall to such charms.

Amid that, there was one person who was trembling.

“...” This person wordlessly stepped forward.

Jinshi was already too late to stretch his hand out to stop him.

There was a dull sound. Something fell alongside it.

That continued two times.

Basen had raised his fists. Uryuu and his son were on the ground, their faces twisted. The twisted faces were literal, no, it would be more correct to say that Basen had twisted them.

Blood splattered and several molars had fallen to the ground.

“I don’t really care about your display of familial love. But Consort Riishu isn’t included

in this, you see,” Basen said, thick with cynicism.

“Basen!” Jinshi tugged back Basen’s sleeve. For an instant, Basen’s face was full of bitterness, but he somehow went back to normal.

“My sincere apologies,” Basen apologised.

Uryuu’s daughter, who had been displeased up until now, had gone pale. She trembled.

It seems Basen also had the sense to not go as far as to raise his hand on women.

“My apologies. Let’s continue the conversation after you get treatment,” Jinshi said, and summoned a different attendant.



(They goofed up.)

As Maomao thought that, she tilted her head slightly.

It wasn’t the question of whether Uryuu or his son had done it. Either way, they would go as far as to help his daughter, younger sister, whatever it takes.

However, the way they did it was too extreme.

She thought of the example of the Shi Clan, seeing it as an overreaction, but she could also take the opposite view. The Empress’ era aside, the current emperor didn’t have the character to throw away any more retainers one after another, right?

(Could he have plans for something?)

*Hm*, Maomao, in the corner of the room, scratched her head.

She looked at the floor; there were still teeth.

(Even though it’s bad to hit them here.)

Let’s not think hard about why Basen got angry. Postpone it, postpone.



The daughter was still trembling on the chair, frightened.

*Even if this kind of woman gets kicked out, there's no way she can live decently on her own, huh,* Maomao thought.

In that case, there had to be someone outside who will look after her.  
*We have to ask about that too* – it was the moment she thought that.

The guard was outside the room. The only people in this room was Maomao, who was hiding, and Uryuu's daughter.

The daughter must have thought that she was the only person here.

"How did this happen? I'd done it as the Fairy-sama told me," she said.

"!?" It can't be helped that Maomao had stood up energetically.

Surprised, the daughter looked at Maomao who was in the corner of the room.

"Could this fairy be, Lady Pai?" Maomao had drawn closer before she realised.

# Chapter 7

## The Deal and the Use of the Cat

As expected, Lady Pai did not just disappear into thin air.

Maomao saw her as an artist. Though, it seems that a fraction of people saw her as something else.

As a figure of worship – a religion, so to speak.

And a fraction of these people are fanatics who got too absorbed.

Uryuu's daughter, whose name appears to be Yakou(夜光, Ye Guang), looks like one of those types.

This woman, who got a deep impression from watching Lady Pai on the stage, had tried to get in contact with the Lady. As a result, it seems the Lady had performed a divination for Yakou.

"You have someone by your side who will become a calamity. This could be a neighbour or a blood relative. Yes, it seems to be a blood relative. Do you have a clue as to who that could be?"

The Lady spoke so vaguely; she must have been examining the daughter's complexion with it. She gave several options, then continued the conversation by choosing the words that elicited a reaction. It was a technique oft-used by swindlers as well.

Yakou, being the daughter of the former concubine, might have had some thoughts. At home, she treated her half-sister as inferior. She said that she had been scared of the worst case, where Consort Riishu would become pregnant with the emperor's child. Her persecution complex quickly grew. And the one who nurtured it was Lady Pai. It was a common story.

And so, Yakou mentioned her own sister. And that she had uttered thus:

"Aah, it would be better if she's gone."

Lady Pai had smiled at Yakou who whispered that, answering with “I understand”. The thing the Lady handed over after saying that, was the paper doll.

(How dicey.)

If the daughter was one who believed in divination, she would also believe in curses. After that, when she came to know about Consort Riishu’s assault, she thought that her curse had been successful.

And then, when she got distrust from Jinshi. And when she was believed to have tried attempting something to the consort, even though Consort Riishu is her half-sister.

(Is she a moron?)

Lady Pai had hidden herself, but she could give word if there was anything. And so, Yakou, who then informed Lady Pai of what she had been suspected of, received a letter.

How she could escape – that was what had been detailed in the writing. It seems it was written that the Lady would look after the daughter after she left the estate as a mourner.

It was Yakou’s older brother who had been the most slumped when he heard about the details.

“...didn’t you employ the thugs yourself?” he asked.

The older brother, who thought that the family will be punished along with his younger sister due to Consort Riishu’s assault, had collaborated with his younger sister’s words. The one who arranged for the mourners was also the older brother. As for Uryuu, he said nothing from start to finish. If he believed the words of Yakou and her older brother, the collaborators in the family were not just two people, but could the fact that he had erroneously determined the body as his daughter, be a mere mistake, or something of suspect?

In order to hide away from Uryuu and the others who had finished their medical treatment, Maomao returned to the corner of the room once again. She paid no heed to the daughter’s glances.

Well then, if the curse will lead to punishment, Yakou's crimes would be heavy, but that will depend on the judge's end as well. Unfortunately, neither the emperor nor Jinshi believed in curses to such an extent. They will simply read *that* as ill-intent, but it will be difficult to treat it as if it was implemented.

The issue for that would be—.

"Everything about the consort, huh," Jinshi said.

It would have to be about the connection with Lady Pai on whether the question of confidentiality still exists.

In the face of Jinshi's questioning about that point, the one who opened his mouth was Uryuu.

"How did you communicate with her?" The father asked his daughter. He didn't enunciate properly due to the gap in his teeth.

"That... I was told to tell no one."

"In that case, all of us will be punished."

Hearing the words *punished*, Yakou shivered. "But, the lady fairy said I must not tell."

"Have you forgotten about the Shi Clan?"

Yakou trembled in fright. Her brother also turned green.

Jinshi made a bitter expression. A different subordinate was standing expressionlessly behind him on the side. Not Basen – that man will surely be chastised by Gaoshun after this.

Well then, she had heard before that the man called Uryuu was a person who excelled in business, but he was made to demonstrate his speciality here.

Uryuu stroked his own misshapen cheek.

Bringing up the name of the Shi Clan – what could he be planning with that?

“It appears that the information of this Lady Pai person is still lacking.”

*What about it?* Jinshi gave a chilly expression, but he must be smiling wryly inside.

“Yakou. You’ll speak?”

“B-but, Father.”

“You’ll speak.”

At her father’s declarative tone, Yakou could only nod.

Jinshi slipped his hands into his sleeves and sent Uryuu a slightly overbearing gaze. “With your daughter’s information, we can render everything as naught.”

In other words, it seems he had proposed that thing called plea bargaining.

Uryuu had a fathomless smile set on his warped face. Rather than an official, it was the face of a merchant. “Yes, I understand. Just one thing I wish to clarify, however.”

“What is it?”

“I heard that Consort Rifa’s head maid left the inner palace last year. What was the reason for it?”

Hitting it where it hurts. That incident had been dealt with off the record, but it turns out to be something suspicious for those sharp-sighted people. As Consort Rifa herself had requested it, the person who had committed a serious crime had been let off with a dismissal.

In regards to Consort Riishu’s half-sister, it would be a different matter if the consort sought punishment, but considering her personality, that wouldn’t happen.

Jinshi’s eyes quickly chilled. “Does this have any relation to this?”

“No, my sincerest apologies. I said too much.” Uryuu smoothly retreated. His son and daughter were stricken with terror from Jinshi’s icy expression.

The man called Uryuu was mentioned here and there in the imperial court, but it

seems he happened to also have inexplicable shrewdness.

“Talk about the incident with the white woman without covering anything up. It’ll become troubling if you try to hide anything.”

“By your will.” Uryuu bowed.

His children copied him as they trembled, then retired from the room.

“You people leave too,” Jinshi said to the remaining subordinates. They left with sour expressions.

“Oi. Come out.” When there was no one else left in the room, he finally called Maomao out. She slipped out from the corner of the room.

“You’re more a mouse than a cat,” he remarked.

“I’m neither a cat nor a mouse.”

Jinshi displayed a look of exhaustion and laid his face on the table. He threw out his legs. His posture was slovenly.

“That posture, you haven’t been disciplined. I’ll have to call Gaoshun-sama,” she said.

“If you’re talking about Gaoshun, he will be coming to hit Basen sooner or later,” Jinshi said, and gestured for Maomao to sit on the chair on the other side of the table. Maomao did as she was told. Unlike before, there was a lazy atmosphere. She thought there was no one around, but she controlled the volume of her voice.

“I’m sorry for Gaoshun-sama, but didn’t *he* help out this time?”

Speaking of what *he* helped out for, it was the incident with U Clan. Basen going on a rampage like that could only be seen as a foolish move. However, with the gains changed from this incident, it could be perceived as perfect.

Since, someway or another, the judgement Jinshi handed down to the U Clan became generous.

“From the start, his majesty did not wish for punishment. Moreover, Mother probably would not approve.”

She felt that it was the first time she heard of Jinshi talk about his mother. She thought that he was talking about the empress dowager, but it felt somewhat weird.

“She had been aggrieved from the Shi Clan incident. She had pleaded his majesty to reduce the penalty to the very end.”

No matter how the empress dowager insisted, it was impossible. If they were to sit irresponsible emotions into this, another fire will start elsewhere and the damage could be amplified.

Of course, fires are something that you think you can defend against but are not, though.

The U Clan wouldn't be able to take a large punishment officially. However, since they had held such a large funeral, they can't say that their daughter is alive after all this time now.

(What are they going to do now?)

The daughter seems to be brought up quite lovingly, unlike Consort Riishu, but how she is going to live from now on is a mystery.

(She's reaping what she sowed though.)

Whether she is going to continuing living in secret in the estate, or going to live quietly in a distant place was something that wasn't related to Maomao.

In the groggy atmosphere, Maomao unwittingly wanted to yawn. It was quite sunny outside so it looks to be quite comfortable if she took a nap in the garden. And so, she wanted to leave the room as soon as possible, but Jinshi was face down on the table, unmoving.

(Could he be asleep?)

When she prodded him to check, he raised his face.

“Did you prod me just now?”

“What are you talking about? That aside, isn't it time I got back?”

As Maomao's question, Jinshi narrowed his eyes back at her.

"It's fine to stay a bit longer," he said.

"There's nothing much to talk about."

(Why are you looking at me with such eyes?)

Jinshi had the annoying expression of a brat. "Don't you have anything?"

"What substantial thing is there to talk about?"

She wanted him to stop it with telling her to do the impossible by talking about something interesting. It was too difficult for Maomao who always slips up with stock phrases from the pleasure district.

"There should be. Something like the weather and such. Or something like what you've been up to lately."

"Today's weather is sunny. The humidity is also dry, so it seems to be perfect for washing. About what I've done lately, it's procuring and compounding the medicine stock that has gotten low since my absence. And then there's Chou'u's discipline. His pranks have gotten overboard so I would like to request an increase in child-rearing expenses. If you can, have that money come to me directly rather than through the Rokushoukan. And I wonder if it's possible to be paid by imported medicines rather than money?"

"Isn't this a business communication? Also, about the child-rearing expenses, Gaoshun mentioned that it was quite overcharged."

(Is that so?)

Since most of the money is snatched away by the madam before it comes to Maomao, she had no idea how much she got in the first place. She always thought that she gets three times the amount Maomao gets given, but it looks like she got more than that. What a greedy hag.

"..." Jinshi, shouldered slumped, glanced at Maomao. "How can you interact with me



like normal?"

"Even if you ask *how*."

Which reminded her, it's been a while since she spoke to Jinshi properly. Up until then, there was the trouble with the U Clan where she got an explanation about the incident but.

It was since they had spoken in the pharmacy before she left for the West.

And speaking of what happened at that time —.

"I'm not bothered by it so Jinshi-sama can take your mind off it."

"...be bothered." Jinshi's eyes moistened. "No. Isn't there more to that?"

"Not really. Ah. Thank you very much for the velvet antler." Maomao remembered and thanked him insincerely. "I have sliced them up and compounded them as soon as I could. As expected of its name as a miracle drug, its effectiveness is marvellous. I have given a packet to a number of honoured guests, but it sold very well as the word spread from that. I've also raised the price. Nonetheless there seems to a lot of gentlemen who want to be vigorous, so there are those who said that they will pay no matter how much it is, you know. Is it possible for you to tell me the channel you obtained the velvet antlers?"

"No, what effect are you on about? Rather, just then you were way more talkative than usual, huh!"

Did he order them because they were unusual while not even knowing about its effect? In that case, she decided the portion she left for Jinshi was unneeded. Let's sell it.

"No, that's not what I'm talking about!" Jinshi raised his chin. His ears were a little red.

"Are you... not even... embarrassed before the one who k-kissed you?" Jinshi said with a little stammer.

"Even if you say that, if you get bothered by that all the time you can't work."

It's a common sight in the pleasure district.

Rather, it's because it's a place where people do what bugs do when they mate.

"Work, you say..."

"If I get shy towards Consort Rifa, I won't be able to do my work, right?"

"What does Consort Rifa have to do with this?" Jinshi looked at her with a look of heartfelt marvel.

"Didn't Consort Rifa not eat properly when she was sick?"

Moreover, she didn't even try to put food in her mouth herself. Maomao had to take tough measures for the women then.

About what measures she took – Jinshi, who guessed it, slapped the table. "O-oi! Consort Rifa is a woman!"

"It's because she's a consort. It'll be problematic if she's a gentleman, right?"

"No, that's not what I meant!"

She understood what he was trying to say, but Maomao was also desperate then. Rather, if Consort Rifa were to pass away, Maomao thought that her head will be separated from her body as well. Even if she had to chase out the people in the way who had kicked themselves in away from the room as the maids were shouting around her, she needed to feed the consort.

"Since she recovered because of that, I'm glad."

"..."

Consort Rifa is embracing a new imperial prince. Could she have imagined that from the circumstances then?

Maomao believed the things she did was not wrong.

Jinshi slumped his face down again. As his face was lowered, he gestured for Maomao to come towards him.

"Do you want to kiss?" she asked.

“That’s totally not what I mean!” Jinshi said as he gently hugged her. He did nothing else. He simply hugged her.

Occasionally, the man resembles the shitty brat when he comes to fawn on her. Chou’u’s memories have yet to return, but it appears that he knows that he lost something big. He has been hugging that distasteful ball of fur called maomao or something to sleep a lot lately, so he could be stemming that feeling away with that. It seems it has some use.

Does Jinshi want to be pampered like a ten year old child again or something?

“Will it be over soon?” she asked.

“Wait a hundred counts more.”

(That’s quite long.)

Her posture was a little strained with his body weight, but let’s endure.

“One, two, three...”

“Stop counting.”

(What a pain.)

Maomao waited patiently as she wondered if she could push the ball of fur onto Jinshi.

# Chapter 8

## In Accordance with the Snake God

It was sprinkling. During this time of the year when it's starting to warm up, Maomao always got melancholic from the constant raining.

Maomao opened the medicine drawers and checked to see if the herbs inside were damp.

(I did this at the medical office last year, huh.)

She had cleaned up the place while spanking the quack doctor's butt for his sloppy management. Could the quack be spoiling the goods in the medicine shelves again this year?

The whole time Maomao cleaned the shelves, maomao was showing its belly at her feet. The sight of it, looking completely domesticated, was a hindrance to Maomao so she toed it to the side. maomao looked up in displeasure, but it made no attempt to move so it got pushed to the wall.

Maomao flicked away the spoiled herbs and added what she didn't have enough of onto the wooden slips. Some could be obtained from the market, whereas other she had to depend on traders to bring over.

(I think I can get these.)

A number of them were plants that grew this season. Let's go out a little way and harvest some.

(Looks like the rain has stopped too.)

Though it's wet, it wasn't to the point of rain. There's no time like the present. If she waited for the clear skies, there's no work to be done.

Maomao looked outside the pharmacy. The courtesans were, for the most part,

sleeping to prepare for their night work, so the people around were manservants or little girls who were forced to study.

Maomao headed towards the room where the manservants congregated. She slid the sliding door open. There were manservants lying sluggishly on the floor. Sazen was among them.

“I’m leaving the store tending to you,” she said.

“Hah? What’s the rush?” Sazen scratched his head in annoyance as he sat up.

“I’ll be back by evening. It’ll be to the nearby village.”

“Sure sure. So, just store tending?” He remembered being worked hard by Maomao, so it looks like he got smart.

“There are medicinal herbs hanging from the ceiling to dry. I want you to crush only the dried ones. The management will be as usual.”

“Sure sure.” Sazen stood up from his sitting position. He shoved a hand down his collar and scratched his belly. Maomao narrowed her eyes at that. She saw dirt under his fingernails.

“Wash your hands properly.”

“I know.”

His memory wasn’t bad, but it might be better if he was more conscious about hygiene. There are a great number of guest who found fault in that.

She had to warn him properly about that.

(Will I make it in time for a bus at this time?)

It’s expensive to ride a carriage alone. Many carriages go through the nearby village throughout the day to transport food supply to the capital. They function as a horse bus when they return since they have nothing to carry. The feeling you get when you’re riding one is the worst, but it’s nothing but cheap.

When Maomao left the manservants' room to quickly clean up, she saw sparkling eyes looking her way.

"Freckles. Are you going somewhere?" Chou'u said, his front teeth have finally grown. Zuurin was standing next to him like a follower.

Maomao made a blatant look of reluctance. She pushed aside the brats who came to stick close to her, returned to the pharmacy and wrapped up the necessary tools.

"Hey, you're going out, right? Is it the market? If you're going shopping, take me with you-."

Chou'u stepped into the pharmacy and picked up maomao who was lying down into his arms. *Take me along, take me along*, he used maomao's paws to poke Maomao. maomao just meowed a "naaa" in annoyance.

"I'll be going into the forest. Whatever you say, it's the boring countryside."

"The forest! I wanna go to the forest! I wanna go, I wanna go, I wanna go!"

He clapped maomao's front paws together. The cat obviously didn't like it. It kicked its back legs and sprung away from Chou'u.

Chou'u threw a tantrum on the floor. She thought that he would stop throwing tantrums at the age of ten, but could it be because of his lax discipline? *Even though there are other parts that have strangely grown*, Maomao clutched her head.

Since Zuurin was also going to copy her leader Chou'u, Maomao grabbed her by the scruff of her neck and pulled her up to her feet.

"I'm telling the madam." When Maomao threatened her, the girl stood rigid straight. Only her head bobbed up and down.

"What's the fuss?"

The madam had showed up with a listless expression.

Zuurin gave a start.

“I want to harvest some medicinal herbs while it’s not raining. This guy will only be in the way if he comes along.” Maomao said as she pointed to Chou’u who was rolling on the floor.

The madam squinted and looked at the boy. She took a breath of surprise, then said to Maomao. “Take him along.”

“Hah?” *Why this again*, Maomao gave a look of displeasure. She had thought that, if it was the madam, being one who’s completely rational, there’d be no reason she would have her bring the bothersome brat to work.

“Eh, no way! Are you serious, Granny!” *Yay*, Chou’u got up and skipped around in a circle.

Zuurin also copied him in skipping around, but the madam held her head. “Not you.”

As her words, Zuurin hung her head. Unlike Chou’u, who somehow got special treatment, Zuurin is a kamuro. It will set a bad example for the other kamuro if she went out along with them.

Chou’u smacked the sad Zuurin’s shoulder. “I’ll bring back souvenirs,” he said

“Who’s going to pay for that?” Maomao retorted immediately.

“If you want to go out, bear with it for a bit longer. I’ll redeem you soon,” he said.

“!?”

Where did he learn that phrase? By the way, a lot of the guests who say that were good-for-nothings.

Leaving the happy brats alone, Maomao poked the madam.

“Again, why do I have to bring him along?” Maomao said aversively.

The madam watched the brats as she scratched her clavicle. “Did you go to somewhere far away not so long ago? Do you know how Chou’u was the whole time?”

She knew nothing of the sort. He would have to be kicking up a fuss as usual. He’s close

to the head manservant Ukyou, so he should be fine even if Maomao wasn't around.

"He was never that lively. Since he's here without his parents, even when someone like you is away, he's lonely."

"I really can't believe the words of a hag who use up money to buy children from a procurer," Maomao said cynically. Apparently, her adoptive father Roumen had gone as far as taking her in and shutting her alone in the room no matter how much she cried. The infant Maomao had then reached an understanding that it was pointless to cry so she had stopped since. This might also be the reason as to why her tear glands were so dry.

She didn't really resent him for that. Not like she remembered it. The woman who gave birth to her had to work and Pairin who breastfed her also had work. It was when the Rokushoukan was in decline so Maomao wouldn't have anyone to be jealous of. She just thought that she'll be happy as long as she doesn't get strangled to death.

The madam put her hands into her sleeves. "It can't be helped that they get sold to a procurer. It's their parent's job. It doesn't concern me. But, raising a dullard who does nothing and bludges isn't something we want here. You think that I'm being kind? I'm just educating them so that doesn't happen."

"What about Chou'u?"

"Isn't that up to you how he turns out? I can only watch while making sure I don't die. You have to raise him according to the money you get, okay."

That's a given. *What a robber*, Maomao slandered.

"Oh really," the madam played dumb then left for someplace.



Half a dual hour after rocking in a horse bus, they arrived at the village that was close to the forest. It was by the river; the atmosphere was similar to the quack's hometown, but they produced rice and vegetables instead. The paddies that had recently finished growing rice reflected the sky like a giant mirror.

"Whoaaaaa."



Chou'u was looking outside, leaning out from the carriage.

Certainly, the paddies are the highlight of this season. It didn't look like it was going to rain right now. The sky was also blue. The world surrounded by blue, on the sky and on the ground, looked irresistibly marvellous.

"Hey, Freckles. What's that?" Chou'u tugged Maomao's sleeves. She wondered what he pointed at; there were poles stuck into two sand hills, twisted straw strung between them. It was situated right along the stream that flowed beside the paddy field.

"Aren't those warding ropes(注連, churen)?"

Maomao didn't know much about it, but if her memory served her correctly, it's a spell. Wasn't that something where they make a barrier to ward off bad things?

The reason the shape of the rope was a little different – she thought that it was mixed with the folk belief of this region, but–

(Huh?)

Maomao leaned forward. She felt that the shape of the warding rope was a lot different to what she had seen before. She thought that the rope was a lot plainer before; there was a bit of a twist to it this year and white paper scraps were rolled into it. Shape-wise, she felt it was a lot more refined than before, but are these things something you change willy-nilly?

"We'll be arriving soon—" the peasant manning the carriage said. Although it's a horse bus, the current passengers were only Maomao and Chou'u. A good point about this carriage is that the fee doesn't change with fewer people. Conversely, there are horse buses that get cheaper the more people there are, but she disliked it when it's too messy. The horse also slows down so Maomao preferred going by this one.

After alighting from the carriage, Maomao looked at the forest.

It didn't mean that this forest belonged to the village. However, she adds it in for them when she goes to talk to the village chief. She won't get complaints if she gave them some money. This sort of thing is required to maintain long relations. It would be helpful to have them remember her face.

Maomao tugged Chou'u's hand and headed for the village chief's house.

“ .. ”

“This village has nothing.”

It certainly has nothing, but there's no need to say it out loud. She poked Chou'u's head. She aimed for the innermost house of the village.

There were dried vegetables hanging off the roof of the shabby house. They must be drying it for preservation, but it could grow mouldy this season if they aren't careful. There was a shorter version of the warding rope they saw just then next to the dried vegetables.

Has it been three years since Maomao came to this village? Since she had work in the inner palace, there was a lot of missing time. The village chief had a good memory of faces though.

“Hello.” She rapped on the door, and Chou'u copied her by thumping on it. *Stop that*, she got angry and grabbed the boy's head, when a young woman came out of the house.

“Who might you people be?”

The woman was quite pretty for one out in such a countryside. She was wearing clothes that were simple yet sturdy.

“I wish to see the village chief. He'll understand if you tell him that it's the pharmacist Ruomen's disciple.”

The reason she gave out her adoptive father's name rather than her own was easily understood. There were a lot of people who won't trust a pharmacist with Maomao for a name. If she aged a little, that distrust will probably disappear. But since she had no reason to show off the fact that she's a pharmacist, she used words that were easy to understand for the other person.

The woman called a man in his prime from inside the house.

If Maomao's memory was correct, this would have to be the son of the village chief. The son also seemed to remember Maomao, as he nodded, “Ahh.”

“My father died from complications of a cold last year,” he said.

“I see.”

You shouldn't treat a cold as a trivial thing. If you take it lightly, it'll soon get worse, progressing to pneumonia and then you're suddenly gone.

If she remembered correctly, the previous village chief didn't drink medicine. He had a hearty personality where he asserted that if you drink wine and rest well you'll get better, so while he won't be their customer, he didn't hate them.

“I told him to see a doctor, but, well, it can't be helped. No, let's stop the gloomy topic. You'll be going into the forest, right?”

“Yes.” Maomao passed the new village chief the usual amount of money. In doing so, the village chief shook his head.

“I don't want it. If you don't hurry in, the sun is going to set.”

“...if you tell me that, that's great though.”

What a strange turn of events. Maomao was going to put the money back into her bosom, when Chou'u stretched out his hand.

“Freckles! Buy sweets with that! Buy it!”

“Didn't you say that you'll earn the money yourself?” Maomao put the money away securely and headed for the forest.

“Snakes come out this season so be careful,” the village chief said.

“I know that much. They'll be good ingredients.”

“No, that's not what I mean,” he rebutted and grabbed the warding rope that was hanging from the roof for her to see.

She looked at it carefully and saw that the shape of the rope was different on both ends. The thickness of one side tapered off, whilst the other end was thicker and torn at the tip. It looked like a snake.

“If you kill snakes, the villagers might come to attack you.”

“...what’s up with that?” Isn’t this completely in conflict with Maomao’s thoughts of broiling snakes in soy sauce if she saw any?

Even though they had thanked her for the extermination when she caught a number of snakes before.

The village chief also gave a bitter smile. “It was in my father’s will, you see. Before he died, he got a little weak-spirited and ended up calling for a witch doctor.”

From that, in exchange for getting incense that alleviated his suffering, he was told to spread their teachings throughout the village.

And from that, Maomao understood. So that’s why the strange warding ropes were everywhere.

“This place originally worshipped the snake god, you see. That’s why. It’s for worship.” The village chief gave a bitter smile. If it was a belief that has been around in the past, it can’t be helped – he had that kind of expression, but she was strangely stuck on something.

“But, what about the venomous snakes?” she asked.

Species of pit viper were the enemy of farmers. If they get bit by one, they would lose everything.

The village chief whispered as he smiled bitterly, “For those, we kill them without getting found out. Though we are deeply religious, that’s something that can’t be helped.”

The village chief must have various faces as well. The young woman who was probably his wife was glaring at them.

It might be unpleasant to see her husband talking secretly in front of her.

“Come on, shall we go?” Maomao said.

“kay,” Chou’u replied.

Maomao quickly entered the forest with Chou'u in tow.

## Chapter 9

### Dancing Water Spirit (1)

“Freckles, are you done yet?” Chou’u asked. He was sitting on a tree stump, kicking his feet.

(That’s why I didn’t want him to come.)

The brat is fickle. Though it’s fine to bring him along, she could see him becoming baggage. No doubt the hag told her to bring the boy along to get him out of the way of the manservants’ work. What lonely.

Maomao ignored Chou’u’s complaints and cut the grass growing at the roots of a tree. She only wanted to use the buds, but the sorting will come later.

“Heyyyy–, Freckles—”

“Shut up. You were the one who wanted to come along,” Maomao said as she thrust the medicinal herb into the jute bag.

Chou’u placed his hands on his lap and looked at Maomao with displeasure. “But I’m tired.”

The walking distance wasn’t too great, but it’s hard to walk on grass and dead leaves. She understood that this will be tiring for Chou’u whose body was still numb. There’s nothing she could do about it. Even so, Maomao wasn’t going to spoil him.

“Then wait here. I’m going to go deeper in,” she said.

“Ehhh—” Chou’u’s mouth gaped open. He looked like he wanted to say something to her. “Are you leaving me behind!”

“You’re tired, right? Wait for me.”

Chou’u twisted his face in reluctance and got off the tree stump. As the crone had

mentioned, some people are the type to get lonely. It's quite common among manservants and little girls in the pleasure district.

"I'm going! I'm going, so don't leave me behind!"

Chou'u hobbled after Maomao. She looked at him coldly as she headed deeper into the forest.



The forest was growing with various types of trees. Since there were a lot of broadleaf trees, there would be a lot of fruits in autumn. Conifer trees were suited for timber products, but it seems that these were mostly found in the forests of the northern region.

Maomao ate a raspberry she found along the way. It was fine that Chou'u was copying her, but his mouth got red and sticky.

"They're sour."

"They are just starting to grow," she said, not stopping her raspberry picking.

"Freckles! Can you eat this mushroom?" Chou'u said. He found a small mushroom on a dead tree.

(How unusual.)

She thought that the mushroom would be found a little further north, but to think that they would even grow here. Maomao picked the small mushroom.

"Is it edible?" he asked.

"Unfortunately, this isn't tasty. Also, it's not poisonous."

In other words, it was something Maomao had no interest in. Chou'u dropped his shoulders in disappointment.

She proceeded happily, having found reishi along the way, and then came upon a lake. This forest used to be a large enough that it also surrounded the lake but it grew

smaller and scattered due to the paddies.

What's left of the divided forest was adjacent to a different village. Rather, it might have been divided when the village got built.

Since there were plants that only grew by the waterside, Maomao headed towards the lake. She could see a small island right in the centre. There were warding ropes at the boundary between the forest and the lake. In times past, it was said that places of water were entrances to the other world. The small island in the lake would be for that reason too – as a small shrine. She had heard before that the guardian of the lake resided there, and that the said-guardian transformed into a large snake. The saying to not kill snakes must have come from there.

And then, there was a small hut on the bank of the lake that managed all of that.

Maomao headed for that small hut.

The small hut had a raised floor. It seems that lake water rises up to this small hut when it rains heavily – it was for that reason. There were markings on the pillars of the hut showing how high the water went.

Chou'u pointed and looked at the water level marks with interest. Maomao went up the stairs and peered inside the hut.

A hairy old man emerged from inside as if he had noticed her gaze. "Since I haven't seen you for a couple of years, I thought you became a bride and left or something."

"Too bad. I'm an old maid," she said.

"Considering all that, it looks like you have a big child."

*He's such a sharp-tongued old man, as usual,* Maomao thought. It seems he's an old acquaintance of her adoptive father Ruomen; a doctor in the capital a long time ago. His skill was good, but due to his eccentric personality and misanthropy, he's now retired and living in such a remote place.

Nowadays he scraped by while picking medicinal herbs. He's the manager of the shrine, but it seems it wasn't a big deal in the end. There was no boat on the lake. It doesn't even look like he went to the shrine either.

"Here. If there's what you want, take it and go." The old man laid out the herbs he had



dried on the wall on the shabby table. It would be quicker to buy rare and out of season herbs from this old man.

Maomao went inside the hut to appraise those herbs.

The old man sat on a chair and stooped forward. He's more than ten years older than Ruomen so she had no idea when he will keel over.

From the three years she hadn't met him, it looks like he has aged even more.

However, he had dried the herbs carefully and the quality wasn't bad either. And besides, she thought that the amount he gathered was quite steady for a senile old fool.

"I'm relieved that you're not senile, but you've gathered some pretty nice stuff," she said.

"The old maid really has a sharp tongue."

At the words directed to Maomao, the one who laughed was Chou'u. She glowered at him with narrowed eyes and set the herbs she needed on the cloth bag.

"What are you on about. I recently got a helper," the old man continued.

"A helper I see. A village child? You're doing pretty well, I see."

Maomao looked at Chou'u purposely. "What the heck," the boy pouted.

"Not at all. It's a guy I recently picked up in the capital. He does pretty well. Come on, if you spread rumours..."

When he said that, she heard a voice from the upper floor.

"Grandpaaa. I got what you asked for. Huh? Guests?"

She somehow recognised that absolutely cheerful voice.

The one who showed up swinging a large cloth bag was a young man who was wearing a cloth as an eyepatch.

(So that's why I recognised his voice.)

Standing there was the man with a face full of smallpox scars who should have been looking for work in the capital, Kokuyou.



“Wellll, and then, you see, they told me that they didn’t want a doctor with such a horrible face—”

The man called Kokuyou was once again talking to her with a voice that didn’t sound sorry for himself at all.

This talkative man, when he noticed Maomao, went to chat with her nonstop. The old man asked her “You know him?” and Chou’u was surprised, “You sure know a lot of weird big bros.”

To put it simply, when this man tried to start out as a doctor at the capital, he visited several clinics. And then he was asked about the reason for his eyepatch every time and the idiot honestly showed them his scars. The doctors lacking in knowledge told him to never come back again as he’ll spread the disease and chased him out. The doctors with the knowledge knew that he wasn’t infectious anymore, and still, while they were doctors, they were also a service business. There was no simple reason to employ a strange man with an eyepatch.

And amid that, he said he got picked up by this old man who, spurred by his ageing body, came to deliver the ordered medicine herbs. They had happened to meet as he was being chased out from a clinic.

The old man may be misanthropic, but he was also a doctor with attested skill. Since he was at the age where it was hard to move around, he had been wishing for a helper. When Kokuyou was asked for his knowledge as a doctor as a trial, he was more decent than the doctor realised and that’s why he’s here. If he’s in such a remote place, the eyepatch man wouldn’t make as much as a racket than in the capital, and it seems it had been explained to the village chief.

“Hahaha. The world is tough. It’s fine if I can eat for the time being I guess—”

With Kokuyou in this state, and the old man having got himself a good helper, both of them seemed satisfied for now.

(If it's like this, would it be better if I called him to my place?)

Maomao felt that she had done something a little wasteful, but it was too late. Even if she were to bring him back, he would be worked hard by the madam like her adoptive father Ruomen, so it might be better that Kokuyou was here.

Kokuyou laid out the medicinal herbs he newly harvested.

"I just picked them. They're fresh—."

Chou'u looked up at the griming young man. The stupid squirrel-like face approached Kokuyou, hands stretched out.

"Big bro, under this eyepatch, what happened?"

"Ah, wanna see?"

*It's gross*, Kokuyou warned beforehand as he took off his eyepatch. Chou'u raised a terribly rude shout and slapped the man's shoulder.

"Big bro, that's such a waste. Even though you looked fine before, with this you can't work in the service industry."

"I know right. I don't think my sociability is bad though—"

Maomao ignored the carefree duo and started to appraise the herbs. She squinted at a large leaf she had never seen before. "What's this?"

"Tobacco leaves," Kokuyou said as he joked around with Chou'u.

Tobacco. Pipes were habitually used by the madam and the prostitutes. Surprisingly, it didn't spread to the masses. Maomao had repaired a broken pipe before and tried to return it to its previous owner since she had thought it was quite an important thing.

The pipe leaves are a luxury grocery item. The stingy madam smokes because she is dependent on it. The courtesans or the madam probably can't go without smoking. Smoking too much is detrimental to the body – her adoptive father Ruomen had also said.

As far as Maomao knew, the leaves are often used by visitors. Since she had only seen the dried and smashed version, she hadn't known.

"The cultivation itself isn't that difficult."

Saying that at the side was the old man.

"Is that so?" Maomao studied the leaves with great interest. She thought that if she cultivated these in her garden, she could get good business. However, would he simply give her the seeds?

At most, he could split the leaves with her, but she wondered what would happen if this got the courtesans into the habit of smoking were she to stock up on them cheaply.

She just tried asking.

"So, how much are you selling this for?"

"This is not for sale." The old man picked up the tobacco leaves and hung several stacks under the roof.

(For personal use?)

However, there doesn't seem to be any smoking instrument in this house. She had never seen him smoke either.

In response to Maomao's question, the old man lifted a jar from the floor and set it on the long table. When he removed the lid, a characteristic stench wafted out.

"Grandpa, this stinks!" Chou'u gave a show of pinching his nose. He peered in while pinching. "This can't be drinkable, yeah?"

There was a brown coloured liquid inside.

"Even if I make a mistake, I wouldn't drink it. You'll die. It has tobacco leaves," the old man said.

"Ueeeh, why are you doing something like this again?" Chou'u said, sitting on the wooden box that was set on the floor.

“It’s used as a snake repellent.”

Maomao clapped.

Tobacco leaves are poison when you ingest it. And she knew that this poison is also effective for insects. It was the first time Maomao knew that it could also be useful against snakes. Insects were a different matter, but she always caught snakes so she never thought about repelling them.

“Don’t kill snakes, it’s because there’s that kind of bullshit around. I’ll have to be careful since it’ll be rough when it becomes a major problem,” the old man spat. Kokuyou prepared tea with a grin. Chou’u’s eyes sparkled when he saw mantou<sub>(steamed buns)</sub> appear from the shelves.

“Even though they had about ten or so years for them to worry about the shrine. To tell me that after all this time that the messenger of the snake god appeared.”

“Ahahah. Witch doctors are the worst—” Kokuyou also agreed with a cheerful voice. Does he even have a personal grudge?

As for Maomao, she thought it was a little mysterious. Be as it may that it was the will of the previous village chief, to think that there are villagers who would hate killing snakes to that extent. Was it because they had originally worshipped the snake god here?

“Did that witch doctor have such a persuasive power?” She asked casually, and the old man snorted.

“Haha, about that. It looked the deeply religious guys somehow got bewitched.”

“Bewitched?”

Foxes aside, to think that they would get bewitched by a snake.

(It’s already bad enough that foxes are the ones that bewitch people.)

When Maomao tilted her head, Kokuyou opened the window of the hut. The lake and shrine were in sight.

The old man looked outside and stroked his shaggy beard.

“I didn’t see it firsthand. According to what they say, that witch doctor...”

He said that they floated on the surface of the water of the lake, danced upon it as they headed for the shrine.

“...said that they are the messenger of the guardian of the lake.”

And that was what he told her.

# Chapter 10

## Dancing Water Spirit (2)

(So fishy—)

It seems Maomao had snorted subconsciously. The old doctor and Kokuyou were both nodding. Only Chou'u's eyes were sparkling.

"That's so cool—, how do you walk on water?" the boy asked.

"About that, you see, you can keep going by taking a step forward on the water before your other foot sinks."

"So cool-!!"

*Don't get tricked*, Maomao knocked Chou'u's head and narrowed her eyes at Kokuyou. She had thought that he was harmless, but it turns out he also has that side of him.

"Can you really do that?"

"As if... is what I wanted to say, but." The old man looked outside, stroking his beard. He had a slightly complicated expression. "When I was a child, I had seen such a thing before."

"Walking and dancing on the water?" Maomao asked, her head tilted. Chou'u copied her, and for some reason, Kokuyou also assumed the same posture.

(He's quite noisy, this guy)

She thought as she looked at the old man.

"Yeah. It was before I left the village. It was originally the priestess' duty to serve the snake god though."

The old man was a distant relative of the village chief. It seems they picked women

from the chief's family to be priestesses.

However, the old man had just said that the shrine has been neglected for several decades just a moment ago. And speaking of why-

"It's because there weren't any girls left due to the palace lady hunts for the inner palace."

She could only nod in understanding.

And so, he said that the shrine was neglected since the customs from oral tradition was lost. That was just around that time the previous village chief took over.

The previous village chief wasn't religious so the management of the shrine died out. What was once a single village split up into three just like the forest. Or rather, could it be said that the village split because the priestess who tied them together was gone?

And now, for form's sake, the old man, who returned to the village, came to live in the small hut as the caretaker.

"Did the former priestess not return to the village after her work was over?" she asked.

"Haha. She was a good-natured girl. Why does she need to come back to the village after all that?"

(That's a given.)

She recalled Shaoran whom she had been close to in the inner palace. Her parents had sold her to reduce the number of mouths to feed. The girl also understood the reality that there would be no place for her to go if she went back. So after quitting from the inner palace, she went to look for work with her own power.

If the former priestess was a girl who could think, she would probably look for a better way of life to what she had before. It's similar to the inner palace, being a stepping stone in a way for women to improve their lives.

"Before the previous village chief died, people had grief over that. If you have to complain about that, you'll definitely need a doctor to look after you."

"Hahaha. That's so laughable— So there are people like that around—"



As Kokuyou was laughing as if he found something amusing about that, the old man poked his head.

Maomao gazed outside. “There’s no boat, so how do you get to the other side? Wouldn’t it be bad if you can’t see the condition of the shrine?”

When Maomao asked, the old man drew a circle on the long table for her.

“The Guardian doesn’t seem to like boats. There’s even a designated area for fishing. Though you can’t see it from here, there’s a bridge on the other side of the island. You can go take a look if you’re curious. Go do some weeding for me since you’re already here to pick medicinal herbs.”

“Why do I even have to weed?”

“You just entered a sacred place, isn’t that a bargain? Come on, Kokuyou. You take them there.”

“Ehhh— You have it rough, huh—” Kokuyou said as he got the grass sickles ready.

If would have been fine to ignore it, but Chou’u’s eyes were shining in wonder. She thought that even if this brat’s been throwing tantrums and crawling on the floor recently, he was turning out as she expected.

“There are tobacco leaves growing close to the shrine. You can’t touch the leaves, but if there are seeds you can pick some.”

“...” Maomao scowled at the shrewd old man as she held onto the grass sickle.



They circled over to the other side of the lake. Despite being called a lake, with the waters murky, it might be better to call it a swamp if it was a little smaller. Leaves resembling lotus floated on the surface of the water in various places.

Chou’u had been scared of the smallpox scars, but he expressed his pointless adaptation ability and completely warmed up to Kokuyou. Before she knew it, Kokuyou was giving him a piggyback, but unlike the manservants, he was swaying a little dangerously.

“Look, it’s over there.”

As Kokuyou pointed out, there was certainly a bridge connecting the other side of the small island. It wasn’t particularly unusual; logs thrown into the water as pillars.

(Will this bridge be okay?)

Maomao looked at the bridge doubtfully. She wasn’t meaning to insult stone bridges, but it looked pretty old. It’ll be troubling if it broke when she’s halfway on the bridge.

“Hahaha, it’s okay. It’s surprisingly unbreakable—”

Kokuyou let Chou’u down from his shoulders and went to stand on the bridge. He jumped on it. It certainly didn’t look as bad as it looked.

“Ah...” Together with a stupid sound, Kokuyou lost his footing and fell into the lake.

“What are you doing, big bro?” Chou’u stretched his hand out and pulled Kokuyou up.

“Hahaha, sorry, sorry.” Kokuyou mussed his head with a wet hand. It might have been hard for him to gauge distance due to his eyepatch.

He took off his outer garment and wrung it. There were patches of scars all over his thin body. Since it’s rude to stare, Maomao crouched down and studied the bridge. When she tried knocking it, there was the sound of hard, dense wood.

“It seems, this bridge was made more than thirty years ago—” Kokuyou said, slinging his wet garment over his shoulders.

The bridge had been built considerably high above the water. It should be fine even if the water level rises.

“It’s made from something that won’t rot, huh.”

“Yeah, it looks like it’s been made from wood from the south—. It’s probable that this bridge, was a lot more splendid that it looks now. It’s made quite nicely, but that would cost a lot of money, right—” Kokuyou said. He walked towards the small island.

Maomao followed him. Though she felt a little out of sorts.

As there was the shine, the island was quite high above the water, just like the bridge. The stone steps that led to the shrine had stains of high water levels.

At the top of the steps, there was a small shrine surrounded by clumps of thickly overgrown weeds. She found large leaves amid that – *these are the tobacco leaves*, Maomao thought. There were flower-like things at the ends, but no seeds yet. It'll need a little more time.

(That old fart.)

*I'll get some seeds after this and go home*, Maomao snorted.

She looked around the lake. The forest that had once been one had been divided into three. She could see a village on the side.

(How strange.)

She got the actual reason for the sense of discomfort she had a moment ago.

It was the position of the island and the bridge. The place with the bridge was right in the centre. It's positioned the furthest from any of the villages. Moreover, it started from a place furthest from the island.

(Is it because there's some meaning to it?)

Even though it would be best if the bridge crossed over from a place closest to the island. Otherwise, it should be in a place that would be easy for everyone.

It was also far from the hut that old man lived in; she couldn't really think of an advantage.

Maomao looked at the shrine with her head tilted. As it had been neglected for many years, it was quite rundown. Only the warding ropes surrounding it were brand new. Even though it was to worship snakes, there were leaves that repelled snakes growing around it – *what an eccentric old man*, Maomao thought.

Kokuyou had started to mow the grass as he hummed, so Maomao reluctantly also went to assist.

Chou'u didn't seem like he had any intention to help from the start. He picked up a

stone and drew on the floor.

“Do you know?” Kokuyou, who stopped humming, spoke to her as if he was grumbling to himself.

“‘bout what?”

“About the priestess person of this village—”

*As if I would know*, Maomao shook her head.

“The old man told me about it. The girls used to be slaves.”

“...”

Kokuyou continued in a voice that only Maomao could hear. “It seems this place used to be a place where the rivers flood often. Until they could control the flooding properly, the fields would be washed away every year and houses would be submerged by the flood.”

And speaking of what futile thing they did to manage the natural disaster in the ancient times—

“They bought slaves to be human sacrifices. Of course, it’s when they have money to spare, otherwise, they would pick a girl from the village but—”

The priestess was a sacrifice in name.

However, one day, a priestess with the power to communicate with the god appeared.

It was said that this priestess walked and danced on the water.

The villagers were shocked; they worshipped her. And she married into the village chief’s family.

That was how the priestess lineage began.

(The old man, he really opened his heart to this guy, huh.)

It was something that Maomao had never heard before. The old man probably knew about this story because he had a connection to the priestess' lineage.

“So it's like that in other words. If the priestess didn't have that power of hers, it would be a story where she wouldn't know when she would be sacrificed—.”

It doesn't matter if it was to a god or a guardian, it would have to be intolerable for the one who would be sacrificed.

“But then, if she thought that she wouldn't be sacrificed, wouldn't she be sent to the inner palace next time—”

That, in the end, she would be sent not the guardian of the lake, but the master of the country.

(If it's like that, I wouldn't want to come back.)

On the contrary, it couldn't be helped if she held a grudge.

Maomao stared at the water in a daze. In the depths of the lake, there were leaves swaying on the surface of the water.

*Children can climb onto some large lotus leaves, but there's no way you can dance on top of these of course,* it was the moment she thought of something foolish.

Maomao stood up from her crouching.

“What's wrong, Freckles?” Chou'u peered at Maomao.

She ignored him and went down the steps. Then she looked at the old bridge. Not at it, but at the supports below it.

It was covered in algae from being submerged, but they were sturdy pillars that hadn't rot.

“I'm telling the old man that you slacked off—” Kokyou said to Maomao with the grass sickle in hand.

Maomao grinned. “You're right. Let's get this over and done with,” she said and returned to her post.



“Give me the tobacco seeds.”

That was the first thing Maomao said to the old man when she came back from cutting grass.

The old man was slurping noodles. It looked like he was eating half his beard.

“I was wondering what you were going to say. If the seeds haven’t come out, give up,” he said, chewing his noodles noisily.

Since she pretty much knew that he was going to show such a reaction, Maomao had an idea.

“What if I tell you that I know the real form of the witch doctor you talked about?” Maomao said in a whisper.

The old man stopped his unpleasant chewing sounds and set down the chopsticks.

“Oi, Kokuyou. Go play with that sonny,” the old man said, taking a ball out from the shelf that he threw to Kokuyou. The man failed to catch it. He ran out of the hut, chasing the ball, and Chou’u went after him.

When the man got the people out of the way, he pointed at the chair, telling Maomao to sit.

Maomao sat on the chair and looked at the lake outside the window. “When that witch doctor appeared, was it right in the middle of summer?”

“That’s right.”

“The rain was lighter than it is now, and besides, it’s the time the paddies needed water, right?”

In this region, the waters for the paddy were drawn from the lake. Though it rained a lot right now, the water levels will rapidly decrease from hereon.

“Was the priestess’ dance also at that time?”

“...it was to pray for rain though.”

*How are those related,* the old man wanted to say.

Maomao dipped her finger into the tea the old man had taken out for her out of obligation and drew a map on the table. The oval-shaped lake, the island and then the bridge.

As if it was difficult to see, the old man passed her pen and paper. The paper was rough, but it'll still be easy to look. She drew on the paper.

In the middle of that, Maomao pointed to the bank of the lake that was closest to the island. “So, she prayed for the rain or something over here.”

“That’s right.”

It was just right at the place that could be seen from the window.

“Normally, I think it would be better to build the bridge here, but why not?” Maomao purposefully asked the old man.

“As if I know about that. Hurry up and explain it to me.”

Maomao grinned at the old man’s words.

“This is hypothetical. Let’s pretend that the water in the lake is quite deep at this place. At the start, you tried crossing this place with a bridge, but the water got deep along the way, so the bridge was abandoned for being useless. It was a waste of materials but you’ll need workers to take it apart as well. So leaving that as is in the water, you make a bridge somewhere else.”

And so, they built it where the current bridge was. Until then, they must have used boats to go the shrine.

“What if the pillars that were submerged in the water are still in the lake?”

The timber for the bridge was sturdy wood from the south. If they used the same material, it should still be in the water.

And so, only in the season where the lake water was at its lowest, was when it is close to the surface of the water. And if you walk on top of it, it would only look like you were walking on water. The small water level adjustment should be good enough if you adjust the amount of water that flowed into the paddies.

In the murky water and floating weeds, if you can't see what's close by, you wouldn't know the existence of that pillar.

"The reason you can't have boats out, it's so that you won't hit those pillars, right?"

Had the workers requested that when they were building the bridge? In order to hide their sloppy bridge building project from the villagers, they must have buried the pillars to keep it a secret. And that it was the priestess at that time who had cleverly made use of that.

The old man squinted. It looked like he wanted to say something. "Did Ruomen raise you to talk of speculation like this as well?"

"I want to investigate the lake to investigate that speculation though."

She spoke to the old man to make sure of that.

The old man scowled at Maomao, but stood up, telling her to come with him.

"I won't talk about myself, but you really don't have a bit of emotion, huh," he said.

The old man called out the two people who were playing with the ball outside.

"Go buy something that we can have for dinner," he said and had Kokuyou hold onto the money. "Sonny, this guy gets overcharged a lot. I'm sorry, but can you go along with him?"

"Yeah, leave it to me," Chou'u said and followed Kokuyou.

"Let's go." The old man went out, carrying a broom.

The place he led her to was enclosed in the middle of the lake. There were floating weeds on the water. It wasn't a place where you can sit down to fish; there's no one who would come here by choice.



Maomao grimaced at the muddy ground. She took off her shoes and pulled up her skirts to walk. The old man did the same, lifting his hakama as he walked.

The water was murky. There was nothing pillar-like to be seen.

“Here.” The old man handed the broom to Maomao. She brushed the water with the handle.

And when she did so—

The broom hit something with a clack. She knew that the thing was considerably solid even through the broom. It wasn’t wood; It felt like something harder and heavier.

“The maidens were sunk into this lake in the name of sacrifice. They had weights drag them to the bottom of the water while they were still alive,” the old man said.

Although it was a customary practice, it must have been a disgusting spectacle for the villages who watched on. And so they did something meaningless to repent and ask for forgiveness.

“The stone pillars in the lake, those are graves.”

“ ... ”

“Isn’t it a folly? Because they regretted that they did themselves if they see it, they built it just so it is high enough to not be seen on the surface of the water.”

And so, from the number of drowned sacrifices, the gravestones eventually reached up to the shrine.

“When the next offering of the sacrifice was decided, the son of the village chief told the sacrificial maiden about the existence of those gravestones.”

And it was said that, by using the existence of the guardian of the lake against them, the maiden was elevated to a priestess.

It seems the previous village chief had known nothing about that. As far as what Maomao saw with the state of the village, the one who knew about this now, would have to be just this old men, right?

Maomao glowered at the old man. "You have a rough idea as to who the witch doctor is, seeing how you know this much, right?"

The old man had known from the start. And he kept silent about it. Maomao who had taken it upon herself to explain her speculation was now like an idiot.

"I didn't see their face. I'm not confident."

It was likely that they had some relation to the former priestess who didn't come back from the inner palace. They could be the priestess' daughter, her grandchild, or someone who heard about the story.

No matter who they were, it didn't have anything to do with Maomao. Even for this old man, it was a behaviour from the distant past.

Does he have something with that former priestess person who was brought into the inner palace in the past?

The instant she imagined that juicy story, her head got hazy, but let's not mention it.

She didn't want him to say that she didn't have any emotions any more than this.

"If you don't make too many weird movements, I'll disclose the trick to you," After saying that, the old man took out a cloth pouch from his breast pocket. He handed that to Maomao. "It's a bribe to secrecy. I'll leave this case to you."

There were some seeds in the pouch. They were probably tobacco seeds.

"..."

Since Maomao got what she wanted to get, she didn't have any need to say anymore. She kept silent, pocketed the seeds, then decided to return to the hut.

# Interlude

Basen was walking down a corridor. Despite the humidity of the season, this building was connected to the middle court and had good ventilation. The presence of swaying willow trees brought about a refreshing coolness.

Along the way, the stone flooring of the corridor changed to timber. When Basen walked there, he won't make any sound with his footsteps. However, if his concentration were to stray for even a moment, the floorboards will creak. A flaw that normally shouldn't be in a place where nobles come and go.

It was purposely made to sound like this. The sound was designed to travel to the office inside.

Basen muted his footsteps since he knew about that. This too was, in a certain meaning, training. If he were to carelessly make a sound, his father Gaoshun would drop a fist on him later. His father, being an outstanding personage talented in both the literary and military arts, lived apart from Basen ever since he was young. That was for the sake of being a bodyguard to Basen's milk sibling, the gentleman whose real name he cannot possibly utter. Basen had always wanted to be like his father one day.

Currently, he was being the imperial brother's bodyguard in his father's stead. Basen has an older sister and an older brother, but as he was chosen instead of his brother, he worked eagerly and with bewilderment.

And so, he was currently heading to his workplace.

At the turn of the corridor, he witnessed a flock similar to little swallows. Young maidens – court ladies who work in the imperial court. Those noisy maidens were sneaking around the front of Basen's master's office.

He knew their intentions. Their ulterior motive was to take a peek at the imperial brother even from the gap of the window.

*How unfortunate, Basen thought.*

Even if there is a gap in the window, it was properly sealed up from the inside. It was constructed so that sounds and voices won't leak from the room. The room soon got stuffy with the bad ventilation, but for that case, they opened a window close to the ceiling.

The noisy sparrow girls made no signs of noticing Basen. It was probable that the only things in their heads was the gentleman with the outstanding appearance, influence and status on the other side of the wall.

It was Basen who got troubled by that.

Basen was bad with dealing with these type of women.

Rather than bad at dealing with them, it was actually that he didn't want to approach them.

However, he has business there.

Basen reluctantly stood behind the noisy court ladies and purposely cleared his throat. The maidens ignored him. He cleared his throat again, louder this time.

The maidens who were clinging to the window turned around. He saw their faces twist terribly. However, that was momentary, as their expressions changed to flowery smiles.

"Basen-sama. Pleasant day to you."

"Ah, yeah..."

It would be better if he pressed them about why they were here, but Basen still wasn't used to doing that.

"Well then, excuse us."

The court ladies hurriedly left, all smiles.

"..." He tried to reach out with his hand, but he was already too late.

Despite being twenty years of age, Basen was bad at dealing with the beings called women. He was indeed bad at dealing with the creatures that were much like those women from before.

That pharmacy maiden his master is interested in was more preferable. For better or worse, that person isn't a woman. She is classified as a woman in terms of gender, but the person herself doesn't use it as a weapon and seems to take gender differences like you would class an animal.

That's why he is fine with her.

Women who use their gender as a weapon – he was bad with those types.

And speaking of why he's like this, it was none other than the fact Basen has people who are like that in his family.

In other words, from watching his mother and older sister, he became bad at dealing with them.

Basen calmed himself, braced his expression, and entered the office.

When he bowed and entered the room, there was a strange scene.

His master was surrounded by a mountain of books. Those books should be the usual documents regarding work, but the things he was reading right now was something different.

Novels have recently appeared on the market in the capital. It was originally popular in the inner palace, reading novels, but it too spread out to the streets. It seems palace ladies who learnt writing in the inner palace had spread it when they returned to town at the end of their service.

There is a trend that saw novels as foolish creative works, but readers were not in small numbers nonetheless.

Basen got quite a shock to see that his master was also one of those people.

And moreover, the things he was reading were in the so-called romance novel genre.

No, it can't be, only for this person, it can't be.

Basen shook his head.

Even with that scar on his cheek, there exists no man who is more beautiful than his master in this country. He is a person whose radiance won't pale even when faced with the flowers of the inner palace.

*Moreover, he won't read such a thing during work,* Basen thought.

The spread of novels was encouraged in the centre of the inner palace by his master to raise literacy. The books currently in his hand would have to be reference books for that purpose. The contents seem to be about what palace ladies like.

*Even though you are overworking, to think that you are still thinking about the inner palace,* Basen squeezed a fist.

"I've returned, Jinshi-sama."

*He doesn't need to use this name anymore,* Basen thought. However, he couldn't utter the imperial brother's name and his master had also taken a liking to this name, so people close to him were using it.

His master, Jinshi, slowly raised his face. The wrinkles on his brows that were just like what was often on his father, Gaoshun.

Basen presented him the note he was carrying in his breast pocket. The note was addressed to Basen; the sender was the pharmacist who lives in the pleasure district.

Most times, when in haste, it goes to Gaoshun. However, those who know that it is addressed to Jinshi would have no reason to not pass it to him swiftly.

Jinshi took the note. There were small things slipped inside it. They look like some seeds, but they didn't seem to pose any danger so Basen passed them over as is.

Jinshi read the letter, then studied the seeds.

"Is there anything written about them?" Basen ended up asking involuntary. Most of the things that pharmacist did were crazy. Was it the same this time?

"They seem to be tobacco seeds. Unfortunately, she didn't write about the cultivation method."

"On the topic of tobacco, they currently only appear in visitor goods."

It was unknown if they could cultivate them properly with a few seeds. There was a high possibility the pharmacist had sent it to them in anticipation of that. It was like

she was reporting to them that she had gotten her hands on the seeds, but growing them will be a separate fee.

*Whether it be that pharmacist or the madam in the brothel, the pleasure district is full of misers,* Basen thought.

“If there comes the possibility of cultivating tobacco, we can obtain it for a much cheaper price than now, is that it?”

If we produce it cheaply within the country, we can apply a high tax on it as a luxury good – could that be her intention?

“It seems to have an effect in exterminating insects.”

“My word!”

“However, we won’t make it in time if we start growing them now.”

So was that why the letter came to Basen instead of Gaoshun?

“It seems it is also okay to put tobacco cinders in insecticide.”

That would have been something insignificant. But, it was better than nothing. And even if there is no locust plague this year, there’s no knowing if they will come next year or the year after. So for that reason, there would be the idea that it will be better to know the uses of tobacco.

“She’s really shrewd.” Jinshi’s lips drew a gentle arc as he talked smack of her.

After putting the letter and seeds in the letterbox, Jinshi’s expression returned to normal.

His expression was extremely serious, but there were romance novels on his desk.

When Basen dropped his gaze onto that, Jinshi gave a complicated look. “Basen, I want to ask you one thing.”

“What is it?”

It was unusual that his master was asking Basen like this. What could it be about?

“I want to defeat just them – do you have someone where you think that?”

It's quite vague. If put that way, he can both say that there is and that there isn't.

He was told since he was at a young age from study, that this thing was self-judged. For that reason, he was taught a long time ago that the person he wanted to defeat would be his past self. Jinshi was also the same; in other words, he had learnt martial arts from Gaoshun. And yet, he said something like this after all this time.

Gaoshun had told Basen that Jinshi was more outstanding than him. About that, Basen had understood it very well. He knew that he was inexperienced; that's also why he made transgressions.

Himself aside, if Jinshi came to such a point, it would have to be an opponent that he really couldn't ignore, right?

Basen gulped. “Jinshi-sama, is the opponent such a master?”

“You can say that. Like a willow tree, it's like when you press your arms onto a curtain, no matter how many times you hit it, there's no indication of resistance.”

Between Basen and Jinshi, theory aside, if you look at it from the practical side, Jinshi was much more skilled. If that opponent could parry such a Jinshi, what kind of warrior were they?

At least, was there such a personage in the imperial court right now?

Basen didn't know, but somebody might be a master.

Basen squeezed his fists.

He thought they were milk-siblings. He thought that even if they have a difference in social status, even if they have the relationship of master and follower, the closest subordinate to Jinshi, save Gaoshun, would be Basen.

By knowing that Jinshi has such an opponent that he hadn't known about, he felt terribly resentful.

He was ashamed that he hadn't been aware of it.



“...I may be presumptuous, but is my being your training partner, insufficient?”

Jinshi’s eyes widened at Basen’s offer. “That... would be unfeasible for you.”

In response to Jinshi who turned away somewhat awkwardly, Basen felt his entire body burn.

“Of course, I think that I am not as trusted by Jinshi-sama as my father. However, am I that unreliable a person that you would arbitrarily decide that from the start?”

“Basen... , if you have to say that much.” Jinshi slowly got up and stood before Basen. Basen was three *sun* shorter than Jinshi. It wasn’t that he is short; Jinshi is tall. Since he gets mistaken for a female with that, Basen could only think that the making of Jinshi’s appearance was granted by the heavens.

“Can you stoop down a little?”

“Like this?” He bent his body to Jinshi’s instructions. With this, the height difference was now closer to one *shaku*.

“Okay, face up just like that.”

It was quite a strenuous posture, but he faced up.

And then, Jinshi’s face slowly inched closer.

With an excessively perfect face descending upon him, he got befuddled but returned to sanity.

Inadvertently, he interrupted the face that was closing in with his hands.

“What are you doing?”

“That’s what I want to say. Just what are you doing?” Basen had retaliated in his confusion, so he gave it his all.

However, Jinshi looked strangely understanding. “Certainly, she gave such a reaction. As expected.”

“U-uh. What are you talking about?” With his shoulders pinned while his body was bent over, Basen was totally flustered. Could this be a stance that he didn’t know about? No, then what was the reason his face was getting closer?

“This might be surprisingly useful.”

“Ummm, really, what are you talking about?”

At the incomprehensible Jinshi who was taking a strange stance, Basen couldn’t dodge it with his hard to move posture. It was a defensive battle where he couldn’t use strength all the way.

And so, before he knew it, he was cornered to the wall.

“You can no longer escape. And yet, she still slips away.”

“...uh, ummm, Jinshi-sama, Jinshi-sama–!” His chin was lifted; his face could only turn red.

When he made a face of panic, lost on how to retaliate, the entrance to the office opened as if they had timed for that moment.

The number of people who can walk the corridor without making a sound was limited, so of course, the person who showed up was someone Basen knew very well.

“...I didn’t see anything.”

After saying that, Gaoshun closed the door with a click.

# Chapter 11

## The Ra Clan

The things that suddenly come up are really the most annoying thing in the world.

(Stop bothering me with more annoyances already.)

Maomao, with no cause to rebuff, squinted at that personage.

The gentle mild-mannered man in his thirties didn't have his usual air of calmness. He was out of breath.

His clothes were stained with mud, ripped in various places, and soaked in blood.

His horse collapsed from fatigue.

There was nothing short of abnormal to see the man who is the adjutant of this country's tactician like this. As if he had rushed here in a great haste, he was being tailed by guards from the south gate. He must have cut through them since he had been making a beeline towards Rokushoukan.

"What's happening?" Maomao only came out because of the commotion outside. However, she was the only person in the pleasure district who has a connection with this man. In other words, it seems he was here for her.

The feebly breathing mild-mannered man, Rikuson, smiled in relief for an instant and took out a letter from his breast pocket.

And then, just like that, he lost consciousness.

Maomao accepted his letter, squinting.

"What's up?" The madam came up to her with a grimace while gnawing on a toothpick as if she had just eaten.

Maomao made the same expression as the crone. "Hey, those officials, can you drive them all away?"

“Depends on the money.”

“This big bro, isn’t he carrying money?” Maomao said irresponsibly.

With that, the crone appraised Rikuson. She determined that his clothes were first class despite being slightly dirty, then checked his face and fingertips. Her head was a little tilted but she seemed to accept him after a short observation and went off to persuade the officials.

“Something troublesome again, huh.”

Ukyou came to talk to Maomao when she tried to carry the unconscious Rikuson under her arms. He took over and carried Rikuson off to the pharmacy for her.



After Ukyou put him on the floor, Maomao stripped Rikuson of his clothes. When she had taken off his upper garments and was about to untie his sash, Ukyou came to stop her.

“Maomao. It’ll be pitiful for him if you take off his bottoms so give him a break,” he said.

“Don’t you need to check since he’s fainted? Even if he doesn’t have any cuts, he might have bruising.”

From what she could see, Rikuson’s injuries were arrow wounds. They were all scrapes, no deep punctures. There was no discolouration on his skin – she thought that the possibility of poisoning was low, but she couldn’t just leave him like this.

In response to Maomao who was treating Rikuson’s injuries indifferently, Ukyou clutched his forehead. “I get it. I get it, so I’ll check the bottom half. I’ll be quickly done so go outside.”

“What young lady is he?”

Will he bite off his tongue if people saw his skin?

“Isn’t this guy Fox-dono’s subordinate? I know already. Wouldn’t it be pitiful for this

guy if he gets bullied afterwards in the distant future? Besides, isn't it better if you check out that letter properly?" Ukyou said.

Maomao helplessly went out of the pharmacy with the letter she got from Rikuson.

She sat on the seat where Rihaku and the kamuro usually drink tea and stared at the contents of the letter.

Yet more troublesome matters were written on it.

Why did Rikuson the military official show up at the pleasure district covered in wounds? There are much more reliable people elsewhere.

The reasoning for that was written on the easily understandable letter.

Rikuson's reaching here was suspicious. And even if he got here, he wouldn't be able to explain the situation immediately so this letter would have to have been prepared in advance.

And she could plainly see that Rahan was the writer of this letter. Seems that guy is calculative.

The shape of the characters also looked like they had ideal numbers – that abacus flipping man has good writing. Though his handwriting was good, there was nothing self-identifying to it so the rows of neat model writing became characteristic on its own.

Rikuson and Rahan, and with that, another person – a certain personage who makes Maomao blatantly contort her face whenever he comes to her mind.

Let's summarise the contents of the letter.

Rikuson, Rahan, and one other person – the monocle-wearing old man – had set out for a certain estate. And then they were attacked by the owners of the house and captured. Only Rikuson was somehow able to break out and went to call for help, but...

The problem was the landowners.

For Rahan, his parent and grandfather. For the old man, his younger brother and father.

In other words, the adversaries were the previous clan heads who got expelled from the Ra Clan.

It was no wonder he purposely came to the pleasure district without notifying the imperial court.



It was a dual-hour after his injuries got treated when Rikuson woke up.

It was too cramped to sleep inside the pharmacy, so they lent him a vacant room in Rokushoukan. The room fee would be collected later.

“I’ll immediately chase you out if the talks sound unmanageable.”

The crone who said that had Ukyou stand guard. Then she went out.

“!?”

When Maomao thought that Rikuson had opened his eyes, he sat up with gusto. As if he was affected by his arrow wounds, he knit his brows and pat his bandaged arms.

Maomao presented him some cooled water. Rikuson, with movements that were unexpected for the usually mild-mannered man, took the water and poured it down at a breath.

Maomao opened her mouth after a pause. “I read the letter.”

Rikuson lowered his face at her words. He squeezed his fists. “...my sincere apologies. I am worthless.”

No, it’s the idiots who had set out willy-nilly without escorts earlier who are at fault.

“Before that, what do you want to do? That is currently more important.”

It must be due to the family quarrel that he showed up at Rokushoukan. It was widely known in the imperial court that you honestly don’t want to have that clan as an enemy. At the same time, you feel that you won’t want to have them as allies either.

And so, even if he were to openly seek for help, he wouldn't know if there would be people who will lend a hand – on the contrary, there's no doubt that there would be more people who will see this as a blessing.

They were a clan with no benevolence at all.

No, all that benevolence got absorbed by her adoptive father, Ruomen. It might be more correct to say that there was nothing left over for the rest. Ruomen's benevolence seemed to be a counterbalance for those people's misfortunate disposition.

Since Ruomen lives in the medical office of the imperial court, Rikuson had to have come to Maomao by process of elimination, but they're calling at the wrong house.

Rikuson coming here to seek help like so as a subordinate, was far from worthless, rather, it was far too much, Maomao thought. If she was him, she would abandon them, and watch from a distance with an air of flawless indifference and not get involved.

"You say that those two are confined, but I can't do anything. Just what is up?" Maomao asked.

The letter didn't say that much.

After Rahan's grandfather and father were driven out by the current family head, they left the capital and quietly moved to an estate in the countryside. Of course, they had deserved a lifestyle of such an extent, but it seems it was unthinkable that such an action would come out of it.

While she said that she could do nothing, she developed an interest in how things turned out this way. She watched Rikuson intently, listening carefully.

Ukyou was leaning on the wall next door. The head manservant who takes excessive care would commonly stand guard like this whenever he tries to stick his head into Maomao's troublesome matters.

Rikuson didn't look like he wanted to speak indiscreetly with Ukyou before them, but he opened his mouth in resignation when he saw that the head manservant wasn't going to budge.

"...there were talks of meeting from them before."

Rahan's grandfather had requested to meet their estranged relatives after ten odd years. The subject was to forgive and forget about everything that had happened up until now and be on cordial terms.

(As if.)

That was obviously a pretence. She didn't think that those relatives of hers would be that much of a fool.

"Since, for Rahan-dono, they are his parents."

Does that abacus bastard even have feelings for his family? Maomao tilted her head, but when she tried to think deeply about it, he had been separated from his parents at a young age and forced to become an adopted child. If you think about it normally, Rahan should be hating that monocle tactician instead. She ended up forgetting about it since she got completely used to seeing it as normal.

At least, if he has feelings left for his parents, Rahan might suggest hearing their story.

And so it was said that the two careless glasses-wearers only had this mild-mannered man when they thought about who to bring along as an attendant.

"...aren't you working on your holidays? It's fine to refuse, you know?"

"It'll be troublesome if I refuse as is. Before I realised, everyone else had already hurried out of the room. I had thought about getting different escorts, but there was that gentleman's personality to consider."

And that was why this poor man who got the short end of the stick was covered in wounds.

*It's obviously better to bring escorts if you think a bit more,* Maomao thought. Considering their social statuses, it wouldn't be weird for them to get assassinated one day.

However, what would come out of it if the landowners captured the two glasses-wearers? What would happen if they returned to being the family head? That weirdo monocle seems to be a prominent high official within the military circles; it's not like



he got into that position together with the family headship just like that. Even in the worst case where they take over, the military circle was made into a type of ecosystem with the monocle's ability. Everyone around them would only take it as a blessing and would come to crush the Ra Clan.

To not understand that much – could Rahan's grandfather and father be idiots?

"Oi oi, don't forget the important stuff."

The one who spoke at that part was Ukyou, the outsider.

"Forget what, you say?"

When Maomao tilted her head, Ukyou sighed in amazement. "They can just make allies. A big connection."

"..."

Rikuson opened his mouth for the wordless Maomao. "The other party wants to adopt you as a daughter. It looks like they want to forge a connection with the imperial brother."

It seems they caught wind of what Jinshi did from somewhere.

Maomao scowled with all her might. "Oi, stop that," Ukyou slapped her brow.

"Counting on that, is good thinking on the fox's over-optimistic calculation."

"There's that too, but in this world, people who are driven to the wall will do anything."

There are people like that. They exist, but others don't want these people to spring up.

"For the most part, isn't it bad to not even bring escorts along?" Maomao asked.

"I have nothing to say about that. But, even if we did bring some along, I don't know if we can deal with them all properly," Rikuson answered.

"Don't speak with hidden implications, I'll be happy if you speak without beating around the bush." Ukyou spoke for Maomao.

“For some reason, we were surrounded by followers who were beyond their position. Even if we employed mercenaries, I don’t even think we have that much extra money on hand,” Rikuson said.

And, amid that, there was also a little problem on why was it only this mild-mannered man who escaped successfully.

Rather, she also considered that he could have been purposely made to escape. Couldn’t their fired arrows be a way to purposely spur him outside?

And so, if he was set free with the assumption that he would rush to Maomao’s place like so...

Maomao glanced out the window.

More people walk around at night in the pleasure district. It wouldn’t be strange to have dubious shadows there.

As Maomao scratched the back of her head, she stuck her head out of the room.

“Oiii, Chou’u,” Maomao called out to the muddy children who had returned.

“What—?” Chou’u was carrying a fishing rod and an old bucket. There were crayfish crawling inside. Looks like that’s what they will be eating today.

“Stay here today. Meimei-nee-chan is grinding tea today, so she’ll let you sleep in her room,” she said.

“What? So sudden.”

“I have to boil medicine in the middle of the night. Can you sleep properly with the bitter stench of broth?”

When Chou’u heard that, he seemed to understand.

“Oh my—. I’m also on break today.” Pairin, who had been nearby, came closer and hugged Chou’u. As usual, her voluptuous body was peeking out from her dress.

“Pairin-nee-chan is no good. It’s still too early to eat him,” Maomao said.

“What’s eat?”

Chou'u still doesn't know much. As if she had noticed that Pairin was sticking onto him, Zuurin came up unaware and went to tug at Pairin's sleeves in a bid to free him. It seems this one understands the meaning of "edible".

"Hey, what's eat?"

"Go roll around at Meimei-neechan's place for now."

"Heyy—, what about meeee?"

Maomao ignored Pairin-neechan and sneaked a glance at Ukyou. He nodded.

It was helpful that he has good judgement.



That night, thugs entered the dilapidated shack in the pleasure district. Maomao quietly submitted and was simply taken away.

# Chapter 12

## Who is the Mastermind? (1)

Familiarity was troubling. To speak of how troubling it was, she had lost her sense of danger.

Maomao was sipping tea while she sat sandwiched between thugs. They were her abductors. The interior of the rattling horse-drawn carriage was cleaner than expected.

“Do you have anything savoury?” she asked.

Just then she said that she wanted to drink tea, now she desired something savoury. As a result, everyone around her looked at her in amazement.

A thug spoke. “Oi, btch, do you understand your position?”

Maomao nodded as she ate the jerky he handed her. “I’m acting like this because I understand that. Your general attitudes towards a guest would be more problematic, is it not?”

She had assumed a polite tone of voice because she thought that it would work out better for her. Certainly, they were a bunch of people who had ordered her to come with them with an authoritative attitude, but their treatment of her was courteous.

“Am I not a guest?” Maomao ascertained, looking at the man who had spoken to her. He seemed to be the leader of the group – he was the only one among them who looked like he had a good upbringing.

Also, there was his fox face that gave her an unpleasant feeling.

(A relative of the Ra Clan?)

Maomao wondered about that. Since this was about that tactician, she could surmise that the followers under the expelled former family heads had been left alone. Even if there was blood relation worth mentioning, that man would ignore them if they lacked talent.

Seeing how the thug was saying nothing with a face twisted with vexation, he had to understand that Maomao had value. *At least, he won't be violent*, Maomao thought, belittling him.

She couldn't look outside as there were no windows in the carriage, but seeing how the journey was relatively smooth, they must be travelling on a road-like path.

How much time passed? There was nothing she could do in particular, so she slept. There was nothing she could substitute as a pillow so she requested an overcoat, which she rolled up and used. It had a faint aroma of incense, so it turns out his upbringing really wasn't bad.

It was just that it was too hot to not even open a window in this season.



"We're here."

Maomao woke up, rubbing her drowsy eyes. The man opened the carriage door. She went outside yawning.

There was an estate before her eyes.

An isolated estate that wasn't in a town.

She could see that she was on farmland from the fields around her. She could see small houses dotted here and there in the distance, but they were too far apart to be considered a settlement.

(I see, huh.)

*Splendid the estate may be, it's regrettable that it's surrounded by the countryside. Such a place would be nothing but humiliation for a high official driven away from the capital.* Maomao thought as she sat on the ground.

"What are you doing?" the man asked sullenly.

"Nothing. There are pretty bellflowers(桔梗, kikyō, *platycodon grandiflorum*)," she answered.

"Are you interested in flowers?"

“They make good medicine.”

The garden looked well-kept. The bellflower is a star-shaped flower with buds that resembled balloons. Maomao used to always play with those buds, crushing them before they bloomed. Then she would get scolded.

The roots of this flower can be used as a natural remedy. Its roots were also big so it looks like good medicine can come out of it.

“...go inside for now.” He looked like he wanted to say something, but she knew nothing about that. For the time being, she entered the estate as she was told.

“Here.” He led her into a room with an elderly man, a middle-aged man, and a middle-aged woman. The elderly man and the woman squinted hard at Maomao as if they were appraising her. The middle-aged man seemed timid, with 八-shaped eyebrows that she recognised from somewhere.

“Are *you* Rakan’s daughter?” the elderly man asked.

“You got that wrong,” Maomao replied seriously.

The elderly man’s face twisted. His wrinkles were deep, so much that his long beard couldn’t cover them all. He could have got them from ageing, but it looked like they were deeply carved in due to his personality. “*Oi*, what are you doing? She told me that you got it wrong.”

“Th-there’s no way! I made sure to bring back the right person!” the man said to the elderly man hastily.

The women, seeing that, eased her fan towards her lips. She must have originally been a beauty, but it was regrettable that she was oozing with the forcefulness of her personality. There was a white twisted cord at the end of the handle of the fan. Maomao squinted her eyes at that. It was a white cord accessory that resembled the lady’s sash.

She was bothered by it but decided to leave it for later.

“Father-in-law, would my son make such a blunder?” the woman asked.

When Maomao considered it normally, the elderly man would have to be the nuisance of a previous family head. He looked nothing like his sibling Ruomen. It would be

appropriate to consider the middle-aged man and woman as Rahan's parents.

When she did so.

(My son?)

Maomao looked at her abductor's face.

"Yes, I did not make a mistake," he said.

She had thought that his fox eyes were unpleasant, but there was another person with the same eyes. The thug looked exactly like Rahan.

That said, she heard that Rahan is the nephew of that weirdo, but there was also the possibility where that nephew would have siblings. As far as she could tell with his age, this man would have to be Rahan's older brother, but—.

"Are you the older brother?" she asked.

"Is that bad?"

It seems to be the case.

Maomao squinted. Rahan's brother didn't look stupid, but how to say it, he's mediocre. Even if you say it nicely, as far as being excellent, it's hard to say that he's outstanding. The weirdo had picked the younger brother to be his adopted son over the older brother. There could also be the issue of personality, but in this case, he must have selected via the nature of the person himself.

(In a way it's good fortune.)

It was correct that he wouldn't become the weirdo tactician's adopted son, but wouldn't that be a disgrace for the person himself?

Rahan's brother was frowning when he heard the words 'older brother'.

"The person called Maomao who works as a pharmacist at Rokushoukan. Am I not mistaken that you are that person?" the elderly man asked.

"It's certainly as you say."

That was not wrong.  
She confirmed the elderly man's words.

"In that case, you would have to be the daughter my younger brother Ruomen had raised there?"

"Yes."

She also confirmed that. It was a little offputting that her dad Ruomen's older brother is this kind of person.

"Aren't you Rakan's daughter?"

"That's wrong." She clearly denied this part.

Everyone tilted their heads.

"I heard that guy produced a daughter with a courtesan though. And that she was brought up by Ruomen."

"It's definitely true that I was borne from a courtesan's belly, but in that case, there would be no way for me to know who my father is."

"That's quite true."

She finally heard Rahan's father's voice. He had a somewhat slow way of speaking but he resembled someone.

"Rakou(羅紅, Luo Hong)," the elderly man said what looks to be Rahan's father's name in a deep voice. It seems he got displeased by his words of agreement with Maomao.

Rahan's father went silent. She felt a sense of familiarity with this man from the part where he lacked fox eyes. Speaking of who, his face was more like Ruomen's.

Nonetheless, it was complicated that everyone had similar names.

"Isn't it fine either way? Leaving that aside, the issue would have to be her connection with the imperial brother, right? However..." Rahan's mother squinted. "I can't help



feeling it doubtful.”

*Why, to this girl*, her eyes said.

Even with flattery, there was no way Maomao would suit the man who was beautiful enough to topple nations. She knew that best even if *that* was left unsaid. Even she wanted to ask.

“So if we had mistaken her for someone else, shouldn’t we let her go back? Since I have work to do.”

“No, that cannot do.” The elderly fiddled with his pure white beard as he glared at Maomao. “The point is, it would be good if my clan has a connection with her. It’s of no matter what kind of person she is; if she accomplishes her role it’s no problem.”

“So it’s something like that, Father-in-Law. It would be better if I had given birth to a daughter so we don’t have to do such a bothersome thing.”

(No way.)

How’s it fun to associate with a clan of weirdos? – she was going to say that but stopped. What’s to say, if she ended up saying that, they would take it as that *he* had an interest in Maomao rather than the clan. *Those who are excessively self-conscious do not know their social position*, Maomao snorted.

Since the conversation was showing no signs of progress at this rate even if she denied it, Maomao decided to bring up a different matter.

“By the way, is the middle-aged fox-eyed monocle weirdo and his nephew here?”

“...the hell are you on about?”

For some reason he countered.

“In that case, would you understand if I say the board gamer fool who can’t hold his liquor and the abacus man who’s only attracted to physical appearances?”

“ ... ”

The atmosphere became utterly silent.

She didn't think she got it wrong in terms of description, but.

It can't be helped, so she changed her speech once more.

"Is Rahan and his uncle here?"

It would be rude to call him adoptive father when the real father is in front of her, so she took some consideration.

"Want to see them?"

"It's fine if I don't. It seems they're alive here for now."

Everyone tilted their heads at Maomao's response.

"I'm tired from the long journey, so it won't be a problem if I rested, right? Please show me to a room if you have one. Also, I would be grateful if you prepare me a light meal and hot water for a bath."

*And while I'm at it, shall I also request for a change of clothes?* she added and the gazes around her turned painful.

"I'll say it once more. Do you understand your position?" Rahan's brother said.

"I understand. Which is exactly why I'll try my best to gain some weight to become a little more attractive."

*So give me delicious food,* Maomao said in a roundabout way as she gave a faint smile.

# Chapter 13

## Who is the Mastermind? (2)

The room she was shown into was stark but well tidied.

This would have to be an unused guest room. The furniture seemed to be high-class, seeing as though they were imported goods, but they had seen better days. It was pretty much the same as what was in the room where she had a conversation with the former family heads just then, but there was newer stuff there. Those were rather plain though.

The meal tasted okay. They didn't use any bad ingredients. There was both meat and fish, but the fish was a little on the salty side. It must have been salt-pickled. It was common to preserve seafood in salt when you move inland. The fish used in imperial court cuisine were freshly caught, brought over on a fast horse before it spoiled, so those weren't pickled in salt.

That weirdo tactician and Rahan actually did provide them with sufficient living expenses. They had enough to employ servants for housework, but not to buy high-class furniture and eat extravagantly.

She thought that these measures were sufficiently generous. It would be humiliating for people who had once lived in luxury in the capital though.

And as they endured with this humiliation for many years, they might explode given some push. What could that push be?

Maomao recalled the white cord Rahan's mother was wearing. The snake-like white cord that resembled those warding ropes.

It would be good if she had remembered wrong, but she thought up something unpleasant.

When she sat on the bed and crossed her arms, there was a knock on the door.

"I have arrived with hot water."

She heard a servant's voice.

Maomao opened the door. A man bearing a large wooden pail entered. He lowered it slowly to avoid spillage, then set down a basket with a towel beside it. It also contained a change of clothes. They were typical clothes for this season, made from linen. They were neither gaudy nor crude.

She thought that it would be a woman who would bring the tub regardless of its weight for this occasion, but it turned out otherwise. In a normal situation, a lone man wouldn't enter the room of a female guest. He would have women accompanying him at least.

The servant retreated from the room with his head bowed.

Maomao felt a sense of discomfort, but not for long. When she picked up a towel from the basket, a piece of paper fell out. It was blank paper. Fine quality paper that had been properly made rather than those of inferior make. It had flowers pressed into it.

(I see, huh.)

The corners of Maomao's lips raised up into a grin and she dropped the paper into the tub.

The previous family heads had looked baffled from the rude way Maomao treated the weirdo tactician. It wasn't baffling; there were times where blood ties were weaker than ties with other people. Conversely, it could also be seen as hateful. The people in question were like that, and yet they were trying to demand something from Maomao. Honestly, their attempts to take the weirdo tactician and his ward as hostages to have Maomao listen to them was more worthless than a mooncake dropped into a puddle.

It was just annoying to be captured like so, thus she decided to cooperate with them for a little while.

Maomao was only just abducted.

It can be said that her job was fully accomplished with just that.



When Maomao was lying on the bed yawning, she heard a loud sound.

(Just in time, huh)

Maomao looked at the crumpled paper in the rubbish bin. Being low-quality paper, it had disintegrated as soon as it touched the water. Good paper would retain its shape for longer.

Maomao opened the door. It wasn't locked; no guards stood outside either. She would walk around on her own, but since she had no idea where she was, she returned to her room and decided to take a nap. They will come to wake her up if they need her.



“Oi, wake up—”

She woke up with her hair being messed about. There was a meddlesome middle-aged man. It was Ukyou, the head manservant.

Maomao yawned. “You’re late.”

“That’s not the case.” Ukyou was wearing dark-coloured clothes. It was the perfect colour to sneak in through the side door of the estate at night. “It was tough, you know,” he said. “I needed to tell the granny first and then there’s the personnel. Also, it’s not like I could leave when Chou’u wasn’t going to sleep.”

For one who was saying that it was tough, he was making a cool expression.

In other words, the talks had been settled ever since Rikuson showed up at Maomao’s place. The other party must have been aiming for Maomao’s capture while letting Rikuson go. It seems they known about her as a rumour but might not have known who exactly she was.

Even when Maomao having a conversation at the pharmacy – she hadn’t noticed, but there must have been people who were keeping a lookout.

And so, Maomao made a situation where it was easy for them to know and easy for her to be captured.

After that conversation, the perceptive Ukyou would understand the reason Maomao secluded herself alone in the shack at least, she thought.

He's a very well-balanced man.

It's really wasteful that he's working as a manservant in the pleasure district.

“...”

“Hm? What's wrong?”

Since Maomao was staring at Uykou, he peered back at her with a mystified expression.

“...nothing. And so, what happened?” Maomao asked.

“Fox-dono and his nephew are in another room. They had the free time to draw a go board on the table with ink and play on it. They even went as far as to say that “we were late”. The nephew who was getting to a hundred loses was relieved to be finally released.”

She could easily imagine it.

To be stuck in the same room as that old man – even if Rahan was his opponent, she ended up feeling sympathy for him.

“Mm but then, everyone is gathered in the hall, so what do you want to do?”

“Isn't it fine if I don't go?” Honestly, she didn't want to be in the same place as that fox glasses.

“We can't have that. The nephew is holding down Fox-dono. You have to go. We can't have Fox-dono get violent. Besides...”

“Besides?”

Ukyou said as if he was putting on airs, “You'll understand when you come to take a look. It looks like we fished up something strange.”



Maomao reluctantly headed for the hall as she was told. There were men she had never seen before standing at the entrance of the room – most likely Ukyou’s acquaintances acted as bodyguards at the pleasure district – and thugs collapsed on the corridor.

When she entered the room, Maomao’s expression immediately twisted.

“MA-O-MA-O——!!”

It was the monocle weirdo, punching into the jaws of Rahan who had been holding him down and sweeping aside Rikuson who had showed up unawares. He charged towards Maomao with movements inconceivable for a bastard who would normally strain his back from exercising his unfit body.

Maomao immediately thrust her hand into her bosom, taking out a small bottle, which she sloshed over the fox bastard’s face. Just as she thought the fox would crash right onto her, he collapsed into a heap at her feet.

“Oi, what did you do?” Rahan stoked his chin as he came up to her. There were fine cracks on his glasses, but let’s not meddle too much.

“It’s not a poison so it’s no problem. It’s a secret miracle drug.” Maomao returned the small bottle to her bosom.

“A secret miracle drug? Can you mass produce that?” Rahan had come to get his teeth into it, seemingly gotten wind of the smell of business.

“It’s not that I can’t, but it’s exclusive for this old man.”

To say it simply, it was highly concentrated alcohol. It’s already a well-known item; it was effective because the old man was uncommonly weak to alcohol. However, to think that he would pass out with just a sprinkle over his face, wasn’t he weaker than before — Maomao scrunched her face. The old man was snoring with a flushed face.

“With this, it’s quiet.”

Just in case, Maomao opened his eyes and check his pupils for irregularities. There shouldn’t be a problem.

“My adoptive father can only be managed by you. Why don’t you show your face more often?” Rahan said seriously.

“No thanks.” Maomao didn’t want to see his face at all. It cannot be helped this time. “That aside, what are you going to do about this incident?”

Maomao scowled at Rahan.

Rahan made a show of moving his gaze towards the interior of the room as he stroked this chin again. “That point is okay. Since we discovered something very nice.”

“WHAT! WHAT IS WITH YOUR SPEECH! FORGET THAT. WHAT ARE YOU UP TO, RAHAN!!”

She heard a hoarse voice.

Inside, there was an elderly man – the previous family head – who had been tied to a chair. Beside him, were Rahan’s mother and older brother who looked mortified.

Maomao ogled at the personage who was sitting more to the side of them. “...that person.”

“Didn’t I tell you? We fished up something strange,” Ukyou said cynically.

Right there, was a woman clad in white. She wore a white veil over her head, looking down as she was shielding her eyes from the nearby light source.

The white of her skin and hair overflowed from her dress. Only her pair of eyes were red like garnet stones.

“Lady Pai...”

There was a wanted person among them.

It was really unexpected. It brought about laughter.

“NOT JUST US, BUT EVEN FAIRY-SAMA! DO YOU FCKERS THINK THAT IT WILL END WITH THIS!”

It was Rahan’s mother who cried out.

Certainly, Maomao had a feeling the woman had such ties to Lady Pai. The woman’s



sash and fan had reminded her of the warding rope at the village with the water spirit. And besides, like Consort Riishu's half-sister, it was a given fact that people who are into divination exist. If Lady Pai is the ringleader who started all those problems, there would be no reason that there wouldn't be the possibility of her being connected to the problem here right now.

However, seeing as the woman was so taken into it, it was conversely just anti-climatic.

Lady Pai was tied to a chair, silent.

Maomao got curious, but she put it aside and looked at the previous family head's people. The three were openly angry, looking as though they wanted to snap at her.

(Huh? One, two three...")

There were three people there. Rahan's father should also be there, but where could he have gone off to?

"It looks like we're missing one more person though," she said.

"You don't have to mind the fact that my dad isn't here."

"Dad", Rahan had said. Looks like he still saw his father as his father even with ten-odd years of separation.

"THAT FOOLISH SON! I'M CAPTURED AND WHAT IS HE DOING!"

Rahan told her to not mind it, but it seems that it's a huge problem for the elderly man.

"Isn't the time to tend the morning glories(牽牛) now?" Rahan said as he looked out the window. He opened the bamboo blind; the morning sun was starting to rise.

Lady Pai turned her face away; it was too bright for her who sat next to the window.

"Tend the *flowers*! DON'T BULLSHIT ME! WHY ARE YOU ONLY LETTING HIM HAVE THAT MUCH FREEDOM!"

(Hey, hey, hey.)

Shouldn't it be won't anyone come save me if I get caught? – Maomao sat on a chair as she had that question. There was mooncake on the table so she picked up it. Rahan's older brother watched her resentfully, but she paid no heed to it.

(Oh.)

The mooncake stuffing seemed like out-of-season chestnut. However, it was the most delicious chestnut she had ever tasted. It was sweet and didn't have the sensation of being dried. No, was it chestnut? The texture also resembled beans that had been carefully strained.

Even for Maomao who didn't really like sweet food, it was a mooncake with quite a nice flavour. Even confectionary shops in the capital rarely release such flavours.

While she was interested, the elderly man moved his mouth.

“EVERY SINGLE ONE OF THEM! GOOD FOR NOTHING! A DISGRACE TO THE CLAN!”

The elderly man stamped his feet. It sounded like the floor was going to break apart.

“TO THINK THAT I HAVE AN ELDEST SON WHO CAN'T TELL FACES APART LIKE A NORMAL PERSON AND A SECOND SON WHO PLAYS FARMER. BOTH WOMBS I SOWED WERE BAD! I HAVE TO GO MAKE ANOTHER ONE, A PROPER ONE!”

The elderly man continued to swear.

Everyone around him squinted at his words.

Maomao ate the mooncake without paying attention. It's actually different to chestnut, she chewed as she wondered what could be inside. Since her throat was parched, she helped herself to some tea.

“EVEN RUOMEN WHO, ON TOP OF NOT EVEN HOLDING A SWORD LIKE A DECENT PERSON, GOT HIMSELF CASTRATED, I DON'T HAVE ANY DECENT PEOPLE AROUND ME!”

Maomao's hand stopped moving.

She gulped down everything in her mouth and stood up with the teapot in hand.

Maomao went to stand before the elderly man. Then spilt all the tea onto the elderly

man's feet.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING!"

"Nothing. I just spilt some tea," Maomao said in a serene voice.

"WEREN'T YOU STAYING OUT OF IT!"

"Yes, I decided to stop. Since I also have a reason. I'll say it once, but if you slander my adoptive father anymore, I prepare boiling water immediately. So please, shut up for a bit."

"WHAT'S WITH YOUR TONE! WHO DO YOU THINK I AM!?"

"A noisy old man who's tied to a chair. A measly old man who can't even avoid tea water," Maomao said with a smile.

The elderly man's face stiffened. Rahan's mother and brother's faces paled.

"Maomao, no more. Stand down. It's fine. Don't say anymore. Even if my adoptive father is quiet now, if you are annoyed, the talks won't proceed, right?" Rahan said.

Rikuson also nodded at the back.

Ukyou pushed Maomao's shoulders and sat her down. He was carrying a basket with something she's never seen before inside. The thing that looked like a flattened dried daikon was releasing white powder.

"I dunno what this is, but it's quite delish."

After saying that, Ukyou put that enigmatic object into Maomao's mouth. Sweet. And when she chewed it, it got sticky. It was stringy but didn't have a bad texture.

(The stuffing of the mooncake is this, huh.)

Maomao scrutinized the object. It was sweet but didn't taste like it used sugar or honey.

Could it be dried fruit? What kind of fruit is it? She scrutinised it when the door to the entrance opened.

A gentle middle-aged man with a towel draped over his neck came in. It was Rahan's father. She was told that he was tending the morning glories, but he was holding onto some plant stems.

"...dear, you're doing such a filthy thing again," Rahan's mother said.

"RAKOU! DO SOMETHING ABOUT THIS, QUICKLY!" the elderly man yelled.

"FATHER!" Rahan's brother also yelled.

Rahan's father set the bundle of stems on the table as he rubbed his face with the towel. She observed it intently. It looked to be some stalk, but she didn't know what they were.

Rahan had said that this father was tending the morning glories, but it seemed to be something else.

Rahan's father put down the towel. His face, gentle and placid, actually resembled Ruomen in some ways.

"Father, even if I return to the family head seat now, there's no place for us in the imperial court," Rahan's father said in a gentle voice that resembled Ruomen. "And besides, it's not a good plan to be with this Fairy person."

"Dear! What are you saying?" Rahan's mother said. "Didn't Fairy-sama's divination see through everything about us!"

Lady Pai was in a daze; it was unknown what she was thinking about.

"You'll easily know that sort of thing from looking at your brows," Rahan's father unreservedly declared in a gentle voice. Their son beside them looked like he hit upon something regarding that and gave an indescribable expression.

"It's not that you want to believe the divination, you just want confirmation, right?" he continued. "And if you break everything, we'll be right where we started, right?"

“WHAT! What *everything*! Tell me what is enjoyable about this countryside!? There’s no proper store, you *can’t buy* imported goods. There are just *fields*. Moreover, far from vegetables, it’s all *nonsense grass*. TELL ME WHAT’S LEFT!” Rahan’s mother said in a passionate voice.

Maomao’s ears hurt.

“While there’s life, there’s hope. You heard about the Shi Clan, right? The imperial court is still in chaos. I don’t know what will happen if we stir up something untactful. Older brother is acknowledged by his majesty even so. What do you think will happen if we take over that person? It’ll be a loss if we get crushed by everyone around us.”

“Then wouldn’t *now* be the opportunity?”

“That was stirred up by Fairy-sama,” Rahan’s father smiled sadly.

As if he hit the mark, Rahan’s mother went silent.

“It’s fine to feel strongly about that Fairy-sama, but if this gets out, we’ll get beheaded along with her. More than your thinking, it would be a greater sin to shelter that person.”

“That’s why you got into contact with me, Dad,” Rahan said.

“YOU TWERP! TO DO SUCH A THING WITHOUT TELLING ME!” The elderly man stamped his feet again. “WERE YOU UNUSUALLY ON BOARD WITH THIS CASE BECAUSE OF THAT!”

“...” The silence was telling. Rahan’s father headed towards Rahan.

The elderly man tried to yell again, but he’ll be interfering with the talks, so Ukyou came over and gagged him. The elderly man wasn’t required in this conversation anymore.

“Will we get blamed if we hand over this Fairy?” Rahan’s father asked.

“I think it will depend on when you started to shelter her. We spared a lot of personnel to find this maiden,” Rahan replied.

“...then, what if I say that I will hand you this?” Rahan’s father showed him the bundle of stems he was carrying.

“What’s this?”

“A long time ago, I heard that there are some interesting morning glory, where the seedlings are sold for high prices. It’s a product from the south. While it looks similar, it seems to be a different flower that it grows roots instead of seeds. Moreover, it didn’t bloom flowers for some reason, so I really wanted to make this successful and widely known.”

Rahan’s father looked out the window.

“Since coming here, the fields have become considerably big. I know that flowers bloom very occasionally only when certain conditions are met, but I ended up with a strange by-product.”

After saying that, Rahan’s father picked up the enigmatic foodstuff that Ukyou had brought in.

“It’s a root vegetable called sweet potato. It’s sweeter than chestnut and can grow even on barren soil. It’s likely that it’s not just me that’s cultivating this in this country. I have distributed a small number of seed potatoes to our neighbours who have helped us, but it looks like everyone ate it without growing them. As an item for sale, it’ll all be ripened by the time they are sent around.”

It looks like the enigmatic foodstuff was a dried version of that potato.

Could they have employed thugs with money that came from there?

Rahan’s dad mentioned that and reflected upon it. “Aside from increasing the number of roots, there are also ways to increase the use of this stem. It’s already the end of planting season, but if you do it as soon as possible, you might still be able to make it.”

Maomao blinked. Rahan did the same. However, his eyes were shining brightly.

“Rahan did say it, right? That there’s nothing that can be used as a countermeasure for the locust plague. Besides, you said that at this point in time, you wanted to get your hands on something useful that’s relatively easy to obtain.”

When was it when Maomao proposed the idea of tobacco to Jinshi? Jinshi should have gotten proactive in cultivating it. Rahan had seen that, so it would mean that he was occasionally keeping in touch with his father.

(I'll have to revoke it, the fact that he resembles dad. )

So Rahan's father is really Rahan's father, huh.

Maomao looked at the gentle-faced mastermind and had an indescribable feeling. Let's just say that she got a pleasant miscalculation on the sweet potatoes.

# Chapter 14

## One Other Shadow

“They prefer to grow in barren well-drained soil. There won’t be replant failure even if you plant them every year.”

Maomao noted it down on paper.

The fields were expansive, dense with green leaves.

“To improve the taste, make sure the vines don’t get too thick. You can prune the roots that have grown vines.” Rahan’s father gave Maomao a demonstration.

The neighbouring farmers come to help at the end of the rice planting season. They were paid with last year’s potatoes. He had said that he sold them after processing them, but seeing the size of the field, he was bound to get excess.

“Why didn’t you sell them all?” she asked

“That ain’t my strong suit.” He gave an awkward reply. It seems the stock he processed and sold was originally grown for self-consumption, but he had sold them to spread the word to everyone when he realised they were more delicious than expected.

“People liked it, but they thought it was pumpkin or chestnut rather than potato. And not just the potato, you can also eat the stem itself.”

It certainly does resemble pumpkin as well. It was dry for pumpkin, sticky for chestnut.

From the looks of the stem, would it taste like butterbur (蕨, fuki. *Petasites japonicus*)?

Rather than getting a monopoly, it just seems that this man doesn’t know greed.

“Besides, I’ll get noisy people if I sold them in a grand scale. It won’t go well even if I get Rahan’s advice.”



He said it indirectly, but he probably meant his relatives. She didn't know about Rahan's brother but the elderly man and Rahan's mother were completely against muddy work like this. And yet, they use the money earned from it so if he were to carelessly raise his profits, there's no knowing of what they would use that money for.

It seems he corresponded with Rahan regularly, but his relatives checked the contents of those letters.

"So that's why you called us this way. Have you not thought about what to do?" Rahan said in amazement. He was walking on tiptoes; he seemed to dislike getting his feet muddy.

"You should know that I'm not smart enough to go as far as to think about what to do. Otherwise, I wouldn't have moved to the countryside after my name got stained by Rakan-niisan."

"It's a nuisance for the people dragged into this."

The weirdo tactician had driven the former family head and succeeding former family head, his father and half-brother, from the capital and succeed the family headship. Then he made his nephew, Rahan, his adopted son. That was all Maomao knew, but it had to be the case.

However, it seems that it was good fortune for Rahan's father to be driven out.

"This place is good. The more you till the more fields you get. I could only grow potted plants in the capital."

Rahan's father was smiling so brightly despite being a middle-aged man covered in a shiny sheen of sweat.

"Isn't it great? I might even save starving people, right? Let's fill the country with potatoes!"

He was extremely enthused.

"Is that why you sold out Grandfather?" Rahan asked.

"What sold out. The clan will be ruined otherwise. That person's pride hasn't changed for ten years. The heck, we're just continuing our usual lives. The daily life is boring

for Father, it's like he swallowed a bitter bug." Rahan's father's expression got strangely cold.

"Grandfather is accumulating ugly numbers," Rahan said.

Maomao was between understanding and not understanding the meaning of Rahan's words. She imagined that it was likely that it was just that man didn't really have a clean financial standing.

After noting down most of the cultivation method, she put away her stationery. Rahan calculated the size of the field and how many seedlings it can hold. The cut seedlings were already loaded onto the carriage. When they get watered, they'll grow vines in a couple of days.

Honestly, if they grow them now, there's no guarantee that they will get a good harvest this year. Like how there's no omnipotent medicine, policies are not perfect. It's only a weighing of the pros and cons and choosing what's more beneficial.

Maomao squinted at the carriage that was loaded with seedlings. "How skilled."

"Yeah, the manservant of Rokushoukan is truly skilled. Seems he borrowed horses from an acquaintance from the neighbouring village."

Rahan was in admiration.

In other words, Ukyou had arranged for it, not Rahan.

"..." Maomao put away her notes and left the field.



Ukyou was speaking to the horse lender before the doors of the estate. The man, who was speaking intimately to the other man as he stroked the horse, was an old timer of Rokushoukan who had been around ever since Maomao was aware of the things around her.

When the conversation ended, he noticed Maomao and waved at her. "Doing well?"

"Yeah, doing well," she answered.

He pat the bunch of seedings. The horse-drawn carriage had a sun-cover canopy, normally used for travelling with others.

“At any rate, is it fine to return Fox-dono while he’s asleep?” he asked.

“He’ll just be noisy if he’s here, right?” she replied.

The weirdo tactician was put onto the first carriage that arrived. It will head straight to the capital. Of course, the talks won’t progress with just the weirdo so Rikuson went along. Even though he’s still injured and tired, it was unbearable that he was being worked hard again, but he was the right person in the right place.

(At any rate.)

Maomao stared at the head manservant.

Ukyou noticed her gaze and scratched his cheek.

“Oi, oi, what is it? Is there something on my face?” he asked.

Medium build, capable, quick-witted. He’s popular with women, but if she remembered properly, he’s married. He had taken in a retired courtesan who’s past her prime.

He likes children and often plays with Chou’u and the kamuro. A long time ago, he also piggybacked Maomao many times.

*I’m so used to him, so how did I not realise,* Maomao thought.

Ukyou is too capable.

And he did really well this time as well, coming across Lady Pai who was being sheltered in this estate by chance.

“Fox-dono’s little brother is such a good person. He gave us this as a souvenir.”

Ukyou was carrying a small bottle on the palm of his hand. He removed the lid and stirred it with chopsticks. He pulled out a thread of something sticky.

“It’s candy made from boiling that potato. The kids will be delighted.”

He licked the candy with a carefree smile. He thrust the chopstick in Maomao's direction, and she shook her head.

She thought that he was always soft on Chou'u, but was she unable to change her thoughts on this?

Chou'u's existence is under the watchful eye of the imperial court. Maomao had met the watcher many times, but they weren't around twenty-four seven.

Rather, wasn't it Ukyou who's around him for longer?

Then she recalled the time she treated Rikuson's injuries.

Ukyou had taken over midway. He should have already known that Maomao was fine with looking at the bottom half of patients after all this time. *Was he trying to cover up for Rikuson?* That was what she thought, but it was that case in a different meaning.

If there was something that cannot be shown to Maomao.

(.....)

Speaking of interest, her interest piqued. However, she knew that it was a foolish plan to pursue that. But she couldn't restrain her curiosity.

That's why she tried toeing the line.

"Why is Ukyou working as a guard at Rokushoukan? There are better jobs out there."

"Hahaha, what are you talking about now?" Ukyou said and let out a sigh. "I like this *job*. Let me keep going on with it for a bit longer."

Maomao replied "yeah sure" at the words that could be taken either way.

In short, it's something like that.

The current emperor has a cunning personality.

It's likely that the subordinates he has on hand aren't just officials.

The ears of his majesty that have been scattered all over the country probably obtained information while living extremely normal lives.

It's quite amusing to blow up this wild idea.

They might be in brothels that high-class bureaucrats frequent, and they might be among the direct subordinates of crafty high officials.

And depending on the person, they will take it upon themselves to keep that knowledge inside.

Working with a face of innocence in normal times, and moving only when the situation calls for it.

Well then, let's stop here with the cheap plotline.

"What's going to happen to that Lady Pai?" she asked.

Lady Pai was once again taken away to the capital. She had two guards escorting her. However, Maomao was caught up on the fact that the lady was alone in this estate.

And Lady Pai had not said a word at all this time.

"Well, you know. It's nothing I should know about," Ukyou said, putting down the jar of starch syrup.

(What's going to happen?)

Maomao sat in the carriage, then picked a sweet potato vine and bit into it. It hasn't been cooked, so of course it wasn't tasty.

# Chapter 15

## The Cat and the Artist

It was humid in the room.

Rain fell outside, with no signs of stopping. And yet, a young master of a large business and his prostitute was walking under an umbrella with a sense of refinement. She was probably against getting her clothes wet, but she won't let the chance to go outside escape her. The courtesans' range of activity is small – the brothel is the cage and the courtesans the birds.

“The cuckoos are calling.”

It was Meimei who was looking at the courtesan walking outside with a look of envy. Her shapely lips were eating something. She had dried sweet potato in her hand.

“What a nuisance.”

Rahan's father, who spoke in a carefree voice, had Maomao carry back a cloth-bag full of dried potatoes. There were still some raw potatoes left, but they were already sprouted so she was told the taste wasn't as good. Well, she also received those raw potatoes, but it seems the processed version was more popular.

It's delicious when it softens after you toast it a little. The sweetness is different from sweets made from sugar or honey.

Rahan's father was the only one who sent Maomao off. The elderly man, Rahan's mother and his brother were nowhere to be seen. Since the elderly man seemed to have various issues, he might have to be properly observed from now on.

As for Rahan's mother, if she was younger she might have been able to divorce, Maomao thought. It was likely that she was an arranged marriage prepared by the elderly man. It appeared to be the case, seeing how she was siding with the elderly man.

As for Rahan's brother, yeah, there's nothing to be said.

If he broke himself off from the elderly man, he seems to be the type that can become a very normal government official, but whether the person himself wanted that path was a different matter. For some reason, it seems like he has an inferiority complex towards his younger brother Rahan – was it her imagination?

Though this didn't matter to Maomao either way.

"Neechan, is it okay to not sleep?" Maomao asked.

Meimei should have been working last night. She had finished her afterwork bath. Her hair was still wet.

Sleep when it's time to sleep – that too was a courtesan's job. It was also the same for the high-class courtesan Meimei; she starts her practice to polish her arts at noon.

Meimei was eating the potato listlessly. She stared at Maomao with her eyes narrowed.

"You see, yesterday, Master (旦那さま, danna-sama. Means Husband, Patron, or Master.), he..."

"Master, he?"

There should be around three of Meimei's customers that she calls Master. All of them like board games. One is a government official and the other two are merchants, she thought.

"...said 'come with me'."

*Come with me* – in other words, I'll take you home. If he had gone out of his way to say that, it didn't mean an outing with him.

"Redemption?" Maomao asked.

"...like so," Meimei replied.

Redemption is the same as a marriage for a courtesan. It's an opportunity to leave the cage that is known as the brothel.

However, Meimei wasn't in high spirits.

"A good for nothing guest?" Maomao asked.

"Nothing of the sort."

“The madam against it?”

“She’s over the moon.”

Then it shouldn’t be a problem, but seeing how it’s something that will decide the rest of her life, it had to be something that Meimei can’t decide easily. Once you decide, you can’t easily go back.

Though she is still a popular courtesan now, it will not be the case in a couple of years. From the issue where courtesans and age being something that goes hand in hand, she was at the age where it would be the best time to retire.

“The other party is already widowed, but he has children.”

(Ahh, it’s the merchant.)

One is still young, so it’s the other one. If she remembered properly, it’s the large patron who deals with wine.

“I’ll be against it, if that’s the case,” Maomao said.

“I know right,” Meimei agreed.

The world will gossip if the second wife of a large patron is a courtesan. More than that, if the children have grown up, it’s a given that they will oppose.

“Master said that he’ll have a different house prepared, though.”

That can’t be helped since she lived as a courtesan. You can already say that it’s her work. But Meimei should have a clear idea of the differences for that much.

It’s just that, if Meimei gets redeemed, she won’t be able to come to Rokushoukan anymore.

Meimei, who is emotional even among the prostitutes, might be bothered about that.

Besides, even if she leaves the cage that is known as the brothel, it’ll be the same if she goes into a new cage after that.



Maomao didn't know if she will ever see Meimei again after this.

Among mean masters, there are those that see the courtesans they redeemed as their property and hit and kick them. Several years ago, a man who redeemed a courtesan at another brothel strode inside to say, "How dare you sell me a weak one. Give me a new one." Maomao had to hold herself back from throwing stones at him; she saw officials arrest him.

Maomao wanted Meimei to find happiness. But, the courtesan will be going to a place where she couldn't declare that with utmost certainty.

Meimei seemed to have noticed that Maomao's expression had become slightly melancholic. Though her face doesn't really change much, people will know when they see it.

"Come on. It's probably, not that bad. If it's bad, the madam would have seen through it," Meimei said, and ruffled Maomao's head. The madam's inspection is strict. The talks won't go strange, and it's not like it's urgent.

"By the way, where's the pipsqueak?" Meimei changed the topic.

"I don't know about Chou'u. Ukyou or Sazen is probably watching him."

"Is that so? I wanted him to draw me something."

"P-rn?" (T/N: idk if this word is censored on this site, so just in case ;D)

Meimei pinched Maomao's cheek with a smile. Ah crap, this type of joke is for Pairin-nee-chan.

Maomao rubbed her reddened cheeks. "I thought everyone was going to get tired of it soon, but it's been going on for an unexpectantly long time." She thought that Chou'u drawing portraits of courtesans and manservants and selling them to earn money was peculiar.

"...my, that child is a big deal. Here."

Meimei went out of the pharmacy and came back carrying something from the back of the clerk desk. It was a fan made from bamboo frames. It was pasted on with high-

quality paper that had a painting of a cat playing with a ball.

Could maomao be the model – the figure of the playful calico cat was drawn with few lines but was strangely lively.

“When I thought that the guests for portraits were decreasing, he came out with this. There are many courtesans who like cats. I thought he was clinging to maomao for the entire day, then he drew such a thing.”

“...”

What a crafty kid.

Moreover, the paper on this fan was new despite the age of the frames. It seems it was repapered with what the quack’s hometown had sent over. The old fan looked like it was remade – in other words, he got it for peanuts.

He really is crafty.

However, it was said that children grow quickly, but as far as she could see with the painting on the fan, she felt Chou’u’s artistic skills had gone up quite a bit. She felt his drawings before were more of putting down exactly what he saw.

“That reminds me,” Meimei said. “That child seems to be studying under an artist.”

Maomao knitted her brows. “...first time I’ve heard about it, that.”

“It was when you went on a long journey to the West. A large patron customer brought him over. Said that he’s an up-and-coming artist.”

It’s a common story. It wasn’t unusual for the wealthy to buy paintings and ceramics as a hobby. And they cut off the artists who create what they like when they are unsatisfied with it. It’s a refined hobby people who have money in excess can do.

“But there’s more,” she added. “He was introduced to Joga.”

“Woah.”

This is one of the Three Princesses of Rokushoukan, a great man hater while being a courtesan. She holds conversations on poems and civil examinations with officials and

students, but paintings were a little removed from Joga's interests.

"Moreover, wasn't that artist said to be good at drawing beauties?" Meimei laughed and clapped her hands, the melancholic expression she had just then suddenly changed.

"Joga-nee, could she be furious?" Maomao asked.

"Yeah, she's furious. So furious she scribbled poems. A foolish new courtesan copied that completely and sent it to a guest, so it's going to be a wild ride after this."

Joga is talented in writing poetry. But you need to be careful about the things she writes when she's in a fit of anger. The words look beautiful at a glance, but it's chockful of poison. She cannot be allowed to write letters requested by guests when she is angry. In those times, the madam inspects the letters before she sends them.

The amorous Pairin is a problem, but conversely, Joga is also one.

Before she knew it, maomao had drawn close to Meimei's feet. It raised a wheedling cry, begging for treats.

Meimei held it up and placed it on her knee. She stroked its chin.

"And so, is Chou'u studying under that artist?" Maomao asked.

"Yeah. It seems Joga really wanted to send him lots of hate letters so she had Chou'u do the runs."

It seems the large patron really wanted to have a portrait of Joga drawn up. The artist wanted to draw a simple sketch at the place then draw up a clean copy for the large patron later, but Joga isn't nice enough to give him a full look of her face without an introduction.

She was told the large patron and the artist unrelentingly wrote down the address, asking her to get in touch.

Normally, a letter would be given to kamuro, who, accompanied by manservants, would deliver them to guests. Of course, there was no way they can take hate letters, so Joga called for Chou'u to deliver them.

It was fine that Chou'u went to deliver the letter, but he took a liking to the artist's paintings and started to hang out there.

"He might be there today too," Meimei said.

"I told him that he can't go outside already."

Maomao wanted to tell Chou'u to try put himself into his minder's shoes. If something were to happen, it would be most certainly troubling to deal with it.

And then, in that case,

"Ooooi, Maomao."

She heard Ukyou call out.

Maomao got up, stepped over maomao that was showing its belly begging for treats and looked towards the voice. "What is it?"

Ukyou looked somewhat harried. "No, it's Chou'u."

"Did he do something again?" Maomao frowned, saying I told you so.

"About that, can you come with for now?"

Ukyou pulled her hand.

"His acquaintance looks like he's going to die," he said.

# Chapter 16

## The Spoiled Xianbing

Maomao was taken to the residential district in the centre of the capital. Public order improves as you go north, so the rows of houses around here were middle-class.

There was an old house there. It was decently large, but the roof tiles were chipped and its bamboo frames were showing through the cracks in the mud walls.

Standing at the entranceway was a man she has seen many times before. It was Chou'u's observer, so she pretended as if she had never seen him before.

Maomao entered the rundown house.

(Oooh!?)

Despite the rundown exterior of the house, its interior was cleaner than expected. That wasn't what surprised her, however.

The walls were painted white. There was a painting drawn over the plaster.

One side of the walls had the scene of a peach garden. Beautiful maidens, not three warriors, were biting into those peaches. With their faces that were round like peaches, black hair like pitch, and cherry-like lips with white teeth peeking out, they looked very vibrant.

It was a painting of the fairies of the Peach Blossom Spring

*(桃源郷, tougenkyou or tao yuan xiang. A utopia referenced in a Chinese fable, a village hidden within a forest of peach trees).*

She heard the artist was talented in drawing beauties, but she never had thought that he would be this good.

Maomao studied the wall. There was a peculiar sheen on the surface of the painted wall. This type of painting was somewhat unlike what she was familiar with.

When she tried to study it, there was the sound of footsteps.

“Oi, Freckles! What are you doing! Come look, hurry!”

Chou’u had rushed over with a pale face.

(Not good, not good.)

It was Maomao’s bad habit to get distracted by things that catch her attention. Chou’u pulled her deeper into the house. What appears to be the living room had a colourful assortment of pigment-like powders, eggshells for some reason, white powder that seemed to be plaster, and a mixture of those scattered all over the floor.

There was a couch in the middle of the room. A man was lying down on it. There was another man beside him, watching in concern. The prone man was unshaven, face so pale it looked white. His fingertips were stained with colours or something. The man beside him had a tidy appearance, but his hands were similarly stained.

“Give Teacher<sub>(老師)</sub> a check-up,” Chou’u said.

He’s young to be called Teacher, but he must be the aforementioned up-and-coming artist. There was a pail beside the couch. There was vomit in it.

Maomao looked at the man. His limbs were trembling. She opened his eyes, looked at his pupils, then took his pulse.

As far as she could see, it looked to be some kind of food poisoning?

“Symptoms?” she asked.

“He’s been vomiting and getting diarrhoea nonstop,” Chou’u said.

“He’s been suffering ever since. He looked cold so we laid him down, though,” the man who was standing added.

“This man is?” Maomao asked.

“He’s Teacher’s workmate! Forget that, hurry, hurry!”

Even if he told her to hurry up, the things Maomao could do were limited. If she didn't know what the poison was, she didn't know how she could treat him. However, if the man's continuously getting diarrhoea and vomiting, there is something he certainly won't have enough of.

"Chou'u, get me water, salt and sugar. If there's none in this house, get it from elsewhere." Maomao threw the money bag from her bosom to Chou'u. The boy ran out of the house with a "Gotcha."

"I'll borrow the kitchen." Maomao went inside.

She peered into the kettle and checked if the water had gone bad. In truth, she wanted to boil it, but there probably wasn't time for that. "Is this unboiled water?"

"It was bought from the drinking water vendor yesterday, so it should still be good."

Bought water should be fine. She considered the chance of having loose bowels from drinking unboiled water was slim. Of course, it's the case with properly checked water, but as far as Maomao tasted with the water she ladled out, there was no strange flavour.

The house looked rundown on the outside, but it seemed affluent enough based on the water they bought.

Maomao looked at the man who was in the same profession. "How this happened, can you explain to me?"

"Yeah." The man, while flustered, carried a chair over to Maomao.

Then he started to speak with frequent pauses. "It's that guy's bad habit, to have no qualms about eating spoiled food. I think, that's probably the cause."

Seems it really was the food poisoning she imagined.

"There was xianbing(餡餅, おやき), he ate that. It looked like it was spoiled, so we didn't eat it, but this guy said that it's edible if you grill it, and then ended up eating it."

*(T/N: Oyaki in Japanese, Xianbing in Chinese: A flattened round wheat flour pastry/pie stuffed with sweet or savoury filling like meat, vegetables, red bean, that's been grilled, baked or panfried. Kinda like a meat pie. This chapter gives the Chinese term and labels it with the Japanese equivalent. Again, seeing how this is in a Chinese setting (like how I chose mahua*

*over karintou back in volume 3), I'll stick with the Chinese term... Unless you guys would prefer that I just call it 'meat pie' instead?)*

Of course, it was spoiled.

It's not like old food can get back to normal after you grill it. The poison stays in the spoiled food.

"Geez, what going to happen now. We won't make it in time to finish the product."

The man touched the large board that was leaning against the wall. The board was painted white. There was a woman drawn lightly on it. It would be then coloured over with layers of paint. As the colours become more vivid, the painting of the woman would no doubt look like she was alive.

"Even though they told us to finish this up within ten days."

"Within ten days?" she asked.

It even had a deadline?

"I'm back!"

Chou'u returned.

Maomao took the salt and sugar he brought over.

She dissolved the salt and sugar in the water she prepared. She then took out a cloth from her belongings and soaked it in the mixture.

She had the man drink by wetting his lips. She had him drink to hydrate him.

She agonised over whether it be better to warm up his body or to have the fever run its course. For the time being, his sweat won't absorb completely with his dirty clothes. She prepared clothes that could absorb sweat and changed him into them.

It was also terrible to have him sleep on the couch, so she prepared him a proper bed and medicine for abdominal pain.

During the course of that, he vomited twice. Nothing really came out; the stink of bile filled the entire room.



Probably thanks to the repeated hydration as she wiped his sweat, when night came around, he stabilised and the tremors also lessened.

By that time, Maomao, Chou'u and the man from the same profession were completely exhausted. This house had nothing else aside from art materials, just thinking that a single bed was enough, so they had to borrow from the neighbours.

Drained, Maomao and Chou'u leaned against a chair that had been carried over from another room. The couch the owner of this house had been sleeping on was empty, but honestly, until it's cleaned properly, it wasn't in the state to be used.

"Freckles—is he saved—?" Chou'u asked.

"Probably." She couldn't state it with utmost certainty. It's likely that he will recover his consciousness soon. However, he shouldn't be allowed to move for a while and will have to eat something that's easy to digest.

Even if she were to make thin rice gruel, he didn't have rice at all, so they needed to get supplies. There wasn't a proper pot either.

"The rice and clay pot, I'll bring it from my house." The man who read the atmosphere left the house. It's rough even though he's tired. Is he that close to the owner of this house?

"What does the house owner normally eat?"

Maomao spoke to herself, and Chou'u answered.

"It looks like Teacher always buys from food carts, or he gets something from the neighbourhood. It was xianbing today."

"Hmmm, then was that what he ate this time?" Maomao asked.

Chou'u's face contorted magnificently.

"What's wrong?"

"No, I just remembered what we ate today. We all ate the xianbing together, that uncle, Teacher and I. It was bad so I spat it out immediately though. But, I thought it was strange from the start."

Speaking of what's strange, it seems this Teacher guy said, "Did I have something like this at home?" when he looked at the xianbing that was laid out on the table. You would certainly get uneasy from that first point, but she was told that he recommended it to Chou'u and that man who had come to his house.

"Anyways, I would be happy if I get treated to anything if he has something, but he has a lot of questionable things that makes you wonder if it's edible." Chou'u was also shocked. It seems it's true that a lot of those so-called artists are wierdos.

Maomao rested her elbow on the armrest and braced her chin. "You often, you know, ate things like that."

"I mean, he said that Uncle also ate it, and it looked delicious."

Chou'u is a glutton, so if there's anything edible, he would put it in his mouth.

"But, the xianbing seemed like it had gone off, so it was super bitter."

"...bitter?"

"Yeah, it was so bad I spat it out. Uncle also spat it out."

(Bitter, but it looked delicious?)

Maomao crossed her arms and tilted her head. "Hey, it was bitter? Not sour?"

"It was bitter. You wouldn't think it's sour."

"Then, did the filling have a strange smell?"

"If there was, he probably wouldn't eat it." Chou'u took off his shoes and swung his legs. The room was ventilated with the window open, but it was somehow humid. It also got dark outside, so she lit a lamp that had toppled over in that area. Not just paints, does this Teacher guy like imported things? It was an unusual lighting equipment in this region, but it used fish oil so she was used to the stench. It's troubling since maomao had been licking oil recently.

"The filling inside, was it stringy? Sticky?" she asked.

“Sticky? Now that you mention it...”

Seems he had hit upon of something.

“It may have been a little slimy. I’m not too sure since I spat it out immediately, with it being bitter. Uncle said that it was rotten, and said to spit it out quickly. Soon after that, I rinsed my mouth and drank it all down.”

Maomao tilted her head at the strangeness of it. “Then, what about the leftovers of what you ate?”

“We chunked it. There’s a bin outside. I threw it there. Teacher got angry though.”

When Maomao heard that, she picked up the lamp and went out of the house. Then she looked at the wooden box that had been placed outside.

There was still food waste inside the stinky wooden box. There were two xianbing at the very top of the pile. It was a good thing that it hadn’t been collected for livestock feeding yet.

“Woah! What are you doing! That’s disgusting!” Chou’u said, looking at Maomao who was rummaging through the scraps. Maomao paid no heed to him, picking up a filthy xianbing with her bare hands and split them. It was filled with minced pork and several kinds of vegetables. Then she broke it apart to check what was inside.

“...Freckles, don’t smile while you’re looking through food waste. It’s really scary.”

It seems she had smiled before she realised it.

Maomao smiling – in other words, it meant *that*.

“Did your Teacher guy grill and eat this?”

“Yeah, he has no sense of taste. Absolutely. There’s no way something this bitter would go away after you grill it. And yet he was saying it’s delicious.”

Her confidence grew. “Hey, that guy you call Uncle, what did he come today for?”

“...he probably came to stop Teacher. Teacher said that he’ll be going on a journey as

soon as he finishes his next job.” Chou’u looked down in disappointment.

“Journey?”

“It’s like, a long time ago, he studied painting in the West. And he said that he saw a beauty he could never forget that time, and that he’s still only drawing paintings of women.”

(West?)

Certainly, with both the lamp and the paints, there were a lot of things that had a foreign air to it.

“Though Uncle said that there’s no way the person Teacher saw twenty years ago is still alive, he still really wanted to see her.”

Twenty years is a long time; any beauty isn’t immune to ageing. If that didn’t happen, she would be either a fairy or a demon.

“Wh-what are you doing!”

Speaking of the devil, the man had returned with rice and a pot.

It must be a strange sight to see Maomao covered in trash in the dark. Moreover, half her face was lit up.

Maomao, while holding onto food waste with both hands, smiled at the man.

Then she looked at Chou’u. “Chou’u, you should go back already. It should be about time the manservant is here for you.”

She expected that Ukyou, who would be worried about them, would come around to pick them up when it got dark. If he had work, he would probably leave it to someone else.

“What, so suddenly?”

“Aren’t you tired? Sleep until someone comes to pick you up.”

“...Freckles, you go wash your hands.”

He didn't object. In other words, he's sleepy.

The boy went inside the house yawning.

"What did you do?" The man looked at Maomao, entranced. No, he was looking at the food waste in her hands.

"After I wash my hands, can I have a chat with you?" Maomao put down the trash and headed to the well.



Maomao and the man sat on the chairs in the kitchen.  
Chou'u and his teacher slept in the room next door.

"What do you want to talk about?"

"How much do you know about poisonous mushrooms?"

"...that came out of nowhere." The man's gaze strayed from Maomao.

There were several things that she thought was strange.

She would normally associate spoilage with sour foods. Certainly, there might be food that would taste bitter when it is spoiled, but can you proclaim that it's spoiled?

It was so bitter it made you vomit, and yet why was the teacher fine with it?

Also, where did the bad xianbing come from?

"Did you know? Among mushrooms, there are those that are bitter when they are raw, and loses that flavour when it is heated. Moreover, there is a lot of food poisoning in this season with poisonous mushrooms."

It's a mushroom that is frequently mistaken with edible mushrooms. The surface is a little shiny. It matched with Chou'u's testimony and in actuality, the xianbing was filled with mushrooms that looked like that.

If it was bought from the food cart, it would have already caused a riot on the streets.

If it was received from the neighbourhood, she hasn't heard any news about someone collapsing from stomach pain anyway. If there was such a thing, this house should also be informed of it.

In that case.

"Did someone bring over the xianbing?" Maomao looked at the painting that was all over the wall. All were beauties that resembled gorgeous fairies. Were each modelled after someone – they all had their own individuality.

Now, it was close to the time the teacher would close his business. The teacher said that when that's over, he'll go on a journey to the west. This man tried to stop him.

He called as a worker of the same profession, but this man didn't have much of the so-called air of an artist.

"What are you trying to say? Isn't this just food poisoning?" the man asked.

"Yes, it is food poisoning. Caused by mushrooms."

The xianbing weren't spoiled. They were just poisoned from the start.

"...the poison was stronger than I thought."

The man had an honest personality. It was a declaration that could be taken as a confession.

Maomao was a little relieved over that. She wondered what would happen if he were to go crazy. Although, if anything happened to Maomao, the someone who watched Chou'u would surely do something, she thought.

"All of the paintings here are splendid." Maomao squinted at the wall painting. *If there was a certain beauty in that, he would blend in with them without feeling out of place, huh* – an unrelated thought came to her mind. "There are even merchants that want to store them, so if you finish up the commissioned painting, you can probably get a lot of money."

"If we don't finish it up, other places wouldn't offer that much, you see," he answered.

“If he were to journey to the West, he would also need funds, but more than that, he would need a companion he can count on.”

“Yeah, the matter has been settled half a year ago. It’s since he doesn’t know many more months will it take if he let this chance escape him.”

What the man wanted to do, was to poison the teacher. In order to delay the appointed day using that as the reason.

The journey to the west – it was to wipe *that* slate clean.

“Ahhh, it’s really the worst. I really thought he was going to die.” He was clutching his head, saying “please don’t die”.

“Don’t you have a more gentle poison?”

*It’s weird to call it a gentle poison, but it’s like that,* Maomao thought.

“His stomach is stronger than iron,” the man answered.

To consider that he can eat anything if he grilled it – it seemed like he wanted to build an iron stomach.

That’s why, to pretend to get food poisoning, he purposely used Chou’u. Upon having a third party recognise the xianbing as spoiled, if he were to upset his stomach, they wouldn’t think it is a mere poisoning.

Maomao was shocked. “In that case, wouldn’t it be fine you talked about it instead?”

“Talking. I did that so many times already.”

The man had said he painted, but in truth, he was no more than the teacher’s painting assistant. He mixed the paints, bought materials and looked for merchants who would buy art from them.

“I’m just like a mere attendant. If he’s gone, I’ll be a nobody.”

“Is that so?”

Certainly, the teacher is a talented artist, but he is lacking in something as a person.

This kind of human will end up dying by the roadside if left alone.  
A person who supports him like so is important.

“It’s just that, I know various things from talking to merchants a lot.”

That the strange movements present in the western region, was no more than just a precursor stage. But, if it were true, it would be better to stay quiet right now.

“When I did so, he said: then it’ll be bad if I don’t go now.”

With his feelings of going to the west unchanged, the artist made steady preparations. Even though he’s a person who can’t even prepare rice properly.

The man slowly got up from his chair. And then he moved to the room next door. Maomao followed after him.

There was a single large board in the dark room. It was covered by a white cloth.

“He said that he wanted to finish this painting this time once and for all.” The man took off the cloth.

“...this is?”

“Seems to be the fairy he saw in the West.”

(How did it come to this?)

Maomao broke out in cold sweat.

She wanted this story to be over already. But in actuality, it seems it was still connected.

“He said that it’s the priestess he saw in Sha’ou.”

And painted there, was a beauty with white hair and red eyes.



# Chapter 17

## Consort Riishu's Turning Point (1)

You don't know what things are connected in this world.

It was unavoidable that Maomao was bothered about the white woman painted by the popular artist.

She looked so much like Lady Pai that she couldn't be anyone else.

(Is my mind playing tricks on me? I want it to be my imagination.)

Lady Pai was pretty much already taken into custody. There was no need for Maomao to be hung up on her anymore after this.

Jinshi and his people had already done various things in regards to the locust issue. They also had hardy plants in the form of sweet potatoes.

It was about time for Maomao to not be worried about anything. It wouldn't be strange for her to be working as an exceptionally normal pharmacist now either.

It was all the more mysterious that problems keep coming up for some reason.

The letter came not even ten days since the artist's food poisoning incident, and it wasn't even two months since she came back from the West.

"Come on. Take this."

It was a cold Rokushoukan courtesan who had handed it to her.

Apparently, some messenger had come around while she was out shopping in town. Though the identity of the sender wasn't written, it was imbued with the scent of incense instead. Those who did that among Maomao's acquaintances were limited.

As expected, Jinshi was the sender, but the contents of the letter couldn't be regarded as refined at all.

## **“Consort Riishu is to be punished.”**

For him to write something like this out of the blue, Maomao’s eyes could only widen in surprise.



The circumstances of the matter were as follows:

Consort Riishu had headed to the West. It had been to fulfil her duty as a consort, but she had left the inner palace for a prolonged period of time—this gave rise to various issues. She may have been kept under close observation, but to say it frankly, the moment she stepped out of the flower garden known as the inner palace, the chance of her mixing with seeds from elsewhere shoots up.

Thus, when Consort Riishu returned to the capital, she wasn’t able to return to the inner palace immediately. For a short while, the same ritual she did before she left needed to be performed—just to make sure.

Maidservants like Maomao could enter the inner palace relatively easily, only requiring the minimum etiquette and a check to see if they were pregnant.

For high ranking consorts, however, it was more bothersome. They not only need to perform some ritual, but also seclude themselves in a shrine in a way to freshly purify their bodies.

This takes around a month, so it should already be over by now.

“It’s troubling.”

Jinshi made an expression of exhaustion under his mask.

It was sweltering to be shut up inside the cramped pharmacy, so she got the madam to prepare a room for them again. Normally it would just be the two of them, but Basen was present in the corner of the room today. He was sitting stiffly with his usual sour-faced look.

(It’s kinda easy to do and hard to do.)

If she was alone with Jinshi, it’s troubling when he would try to touch her weirdly and strangely, but if there was someone watching, Maomao couldn’t easily sit however she

liked.

Jinshi being Jinshi looked at Basen in annoyance, but the other man was sitting silently.

Was Basen watching them so Jinshi doesn't do anything to Maomao?

No, or was it...?

It seems it had something to do with Jinshi's words of "It's troubling".

"Her monthly cycle hasn't come," Jinshi said.

"I see," Maomao replied.

It was said the reason Consort Riishu couldn't return to the inner palace had to do with her late period.

Maomao understood it from the bottom of her heart.

The inner palace was made solely for the emperor. It was the goal of the flowers inside to bear fruit with the emperor.

Amid that, it will be a bit of a problem for a consort who had left the inner palace for a prolonged amount of time to have a late period.

"I don't think *Consort Riishu* would ever be unfaithful," Maomao said.

"I know that, but it's just in case. At this rate, she'll be held under suspicion. Even if that wasn't the case, she won't be able to return to the inner palace," Jinshi replied.

When you consider the structure of the inner palace, the part where it is the high ranking consorts' job to give birth to children is important. It may be unfeeling, but the consort's duty wouldn't be accomplished if it wasn't the case—it's that kind of place.

"She's still young too. Isn't it normally irregular at her age?" Maomao said.

"However, it hasn't come for two months already," Jinshi countered.

Maomao and Jinshi continued their discussion.

Basen cast his eyes down and was trembling for some reason.

“Since she seems to have bad blood circulation, can you treat it with medicine? If it doesn’t work, we can also include massages. It seems her bowel movement has gotten worse too.”

“Yeah, you know it well. That way is better, but the problem lies with the court physicians. There’s only one of that sort in the inner palace.”

“If that’s the case, I wonder if we can use my adoptive father.”

“That’s true. That would be the best option.”

For no particular reason, Basen looked up in the middle of the conversation. He was biting his lips and his face was flushed pure red. “J-Jinshi-sama.”

“What is it?” The beautiful noble, unperturbed, looked at Basen who was as red as a ground tomato.

“H-how, can you talk about such things with a straight face...?”

“Talk about what with a straight face?” Jinshi tilted his head in puzzlement.

Maomao understood what Basen was trying to say.

Jinshi had been working among women in the inner palace for a long time. In a certain meaning, she could understand that he needed to talk about things only privy to women.

But.

“A normal gentleman, wouldn’t speak so boldly, about a woman’s monthly thing, ” Basen said.

“...Ah,” Jinshi said.

“I just saying it incidentally—” Maomao said.

Since he was talking so boldly about it in such detail...

(It's kinda gross.)

What of it if he had somehow slipped his tongue? Certainly, it's more helpful to know a bit than nothing at all, but it's also troubling if he knew too much. Since he wasn't a court physician.

She couldn't say that out so she shut her mouth, but Jinshi drew closer to Maomao.

"Oi, did you say something just now?" he asked.

"I didn't say anything in particular."

When Maomao turned her face away, Jinshi drew even closer.

"Don't lie to me. What did you say?"

"I didn't say anything."

"Tell me honestly!"

"..."

He's persistent. Maomao narrowed her eyes.

If he was asking this much, she would have no other choice than to say it.

And since he was so pointlessly close as he was asking her, Maomao's expression also stiffened. She bent down to get away from Jinshi and he was now looking at her from higher above.

Thus, upon the piling of coincidences, it can be said that what Maomao said was an inevitable accident.

It was that, but...

"It's gross," she said.

Jinshi and Basen's expression froze.

To say it again, it was an inevitable accident.

Maomao had no malice. It was just an accident since Jinshi was looking down on her, so she narrowed her eyes and uttered those words.

However.

When she looked at the two men who became stone so brittle they could crumble with a push, Maomao wondered if she had done something again.



The next letter she got a few days later was from her adoptive father Ruomen. Looks like Jinshi had promptly made the arrangements to send Ruomen to Consort Riishu.

It appears that despite his hopelessly darkened expression when he went back the other day, he did his work properly.

The letter mentioned that Ruomen got Consort Riishu to drink medicine, but there was nothing else he could do beyond that.

Though the letter was only a summary, it seems the maids allowed him to do palpation since he was a former eunuch.

The maids mentioned here wasn't the head maid but the other haughty maids.

(It's better to bring it to a close as soon as possible.)

The check for her virginity was the quickest.

Consort Riishu shouldn't have attended the emperor yet, so she should clear herself of the suspicion of infidelity at least if she proves her virginity.

However, when you consider the method to determine that, it didn't matter if the one checking was a eunuch—there would be resistance.

There was also the means to ask for some midwife, but they were talking about Consort Riishu— she would faint.

For the time being, Consort Riishu's irregular period should be due to exhaustion from

her long journey, so it was believed that if she rested well and improved her blood circulation, she would be cured in no time.

That was what she thought.



It was another five day after when Consort Riishu was placed into house arrest.

It seems the medicine wasn't useful and she remained irregular in the end. So it was pitiful that she got placed into house arrest for that, but speaking of how it turned out this way, the higher up have various thoughts, she thought.

However, there was a person who had run over, unable to accept it. A guest had come to Maomao's pharmacy.

"I can't accept it."

It was Basen, mouth twisted and brows drawn together.

(It's not like I don't understand what he can't accept.)

However, why was he at Maomao's place? He's absolutely interfering with her work.

"How did it turn out like this!"

Though he was complaining, he was glancing out the window of the pharmacy probably because he was afraid of Pairin-nee-chan. The man who *still* had his important thing – Basen, twenty-years-old.

"Even if you ask me about this," she said.

"Why is Jinshi-sama also saying nothing in regards to her poor treatment?"

(Listen to me already.)

Maomao narrowed her eyes at Basen. She wondered if she could call the madam to assemble courtesans and give him some pseudo inner palace experience. It was vomit-inducing for Maomao who knew the inner palace so well to call it unpleasant, but

apparently, for the wealthy who know nothing about it, it's a paradise not unlike the Peach Blossom Spring. It seems the madam got carried away and passed it off by saying, "We'll show you the techniques of an inner palace returner," to cheat people of their money.

Of course, the inner palace returner in question was Maomao, but she hardly touched anything regarding *that*.

There was this one time...

"Howzit?"

"Isn't it good?"

...where they had that exchange, but that was still easy-going.

In reality, as one who returned from the inner palace, the very first thing that came to her mind was the eunuchs. That had to be omitted in its entirety. If the point was to create a customer's desire, the real thing didn't matter.

Well then, returning to the conversation.

"Then, what does Basen-sama wish to do about it?"

"Wh-what, you say...?"

He suddenly trailed off. She would still understand if he was giving advice and words of support instead of saying you have to do whatever in a certain way, but it was meaningless if he was just grumbling about it without knowing what he wanted to do.

Maomao suddenly decided to speak of what she wanted to ask Basen now. "Is there a reason as to why Basen-sama is supporting Consort-Riishu?"

"...that is."

Maomao also knew the answer. But she took it upon herself to say it out. "It is because Basen-sama is Jinshi-sama's retainer, that you are backing a specific consort for Jinshi-sama's sake?"

She thought the incident where Consort Riishu got bestowed to Jinshi was stirred up by the U clan. Honestly, he wasn't keen from the get-go, and he wouldn't even think of



marrying Consort Riishu after all this time either.

And yet, only Basen was thinking of Consort Riishu.

And that reason for that is:

(Personal feelings.)

Considering Basen's birth and upbringing, he's a naïve man where it's possible to say it's abnormal. It wouldn't be strange for him to know one woman, and being a member of the elite, it had to have been taught to him as a part of his education.

(What is Gaoshun doing?)

Since he was supervising Jinshi all the time, was the discipline of his actual son sloppy? His personality seemed to one who believes something firmly once he makes up his mind, so it's actually dangerous for him to delve into this too deeply.

Even though it's dangerous.

(Moreover, it's Consort Riishu, huh.)

It looked like a thorny path no matter what.

It's better to play more carefreely. Should she do business? The courtesans of Rokushoukan are all good, how about that?

While knowing that it's futile, Maomao could only warn him just in case. "It's not really good to hold feelings to a specific consort. Are your actions based on that?"

"...I get it." He made a slightly bitter expression and looked down.

One way, she could have him go back without her asking him. However, it'll also be troubling if Jinshi came over to her place if something occurred as a result of that.

And so, she decided to just ask him about what was up. "So, what's going to happen to Consort Riishu?"

"She's going to move out of the capital to the villa in the north."

“Outside the capital, you say?”

*Let alone the inner palace, but even outside the imperial court, huh*, Maomao thought. If she were to leave the capital, no matter how it was glossed over, you would think that Consort Riishu had done something wrong.

“She will be moving out tomorrow,” Basen said.

“...are you even allowed to talk about this?” Maomao asked.

“Are you going to spill?”

“No.”

She had no intentions of that, but she thought it was strange that he was speaking about highly classified information.

“Normally, I wouldn’t be talking about it.” It appears that Basen could discriminate that much. “As an unspoken agreement, Consort Riishu will move to the shrine of the villa. It was officially stated that it was for a ground-breaking ceremony.”

Officially – she was somewhat tripping over that word.

However, it wasn’t Maomao’s place to stick her head into any more than this.

“Basen-sama.”

“What?” Basen looked at Maomao stiffly.

“Who will be travelling with Consort Riishu when she is heading out?”

“...now that you mention it, I was told that the man called Rihaku or something who got appointed by Jinshi-sama to an important post will be coming along. Also, the people recommended by Tactician-dono.”

When she heard tactician, Maomao held herself back from contorting her face.

(Rihaku, huh.)

The man is like a large breed dog, but he's skilled and his head isn't bad either. A quick-witted man.

The monocle weirdo tactician as well. While he isn't one at all, there shouldn't be an issue on the side of personnel selection.

She was strangely tripping over it.

"And what about Basen-sama?" she asked.

"...unusually, me too," he replied.

Maomao could only nod at this.

(Is there something up?)

In that case, what Maomao could do was...

She took out bandages and medicines from the shelf.

She put those all together and made a small pack. It was a simpler version of the first aid kit she normally carried in her bosom.

"If this won't get in the way, take this," she said.

"What's this?" he asked.

"It's a kit to treat small injuries. There are painkillers and bandages and things. Also, for when you're hungry, a number of sweets."

"Am I a kid?"

Basen's face twisted, but Maomao pushed it to him.

"They're things that won't get in the way, so take it."

"...can't be helped." He reluctantly put it into his breast pocket.

It's fine if he doesn't really use it—though wasteful, they're things that could be thrown away.

However, Maomao wanted to keep in mind what her intuition had just hit.

“I’ll leave Consort Riishu’s escorting to you,” she said.

“I know that much.”

Nothing was really resolved, but Basen went back for the time being.

Maomao sighed deeply. Was he unable to hold back from complaining to someone?

(He has troublesome subordinates, huh.)

As Maomao thought that, she cleared away the emptied teacup.

# Chapter 18

## Consort Riishu's Turning Point (2)

The jangle of bells filled the air.

*It's such an awful din*, Basen thought.

As it had *officially* become a divine ritual, they will be walking with the odd music until they leave the capital.

Although, since Basen had been frequenting the pleasure district as of late, it was inevitable that he had associated the sound of bells with the red-light district.

Can't they use a different musical instrument?

Won't the sarcastic types slander Consort Riishu by associating it with the pleasure district?

Won't ridiculous rumours that ridicule her inability to return to the inner palace spread?

Basen was on horseback, buried in his thoughts.

Consort Riishu was in the horse-drawn carriage that was right in the centre of the procession.

Her maids and belongings were in the carriage behind hers.

Basen was positioned to the side in front of the consort's carriage. The man called Rihaku that the Prince of the Moon(月の君, tsuki no kimi. 君 itself doesn't necessarily mean 'prince'. It's an honorific title denoting high rank. Not the same as the -kun honorific that's written with the same kanji. 月, or moon, is a reference to his real name :D) had recently appointed to an important post was at the back.

An easy-going man, he had spoken to Basen many times, but he actually didn't have the liberty to do so this time.

Such people like them wouldn't be escorting in a normal situation, right?

Even Basen thought that it was bizarre that he was here. He's the subordinate of the Prince of the Moon.

But he was included to the consort's procession. Since he was only here temporarily, someone else led the procession. Though Basen was higher in terms of social status, this couldn't be helped.

Basen had an uncomfortable feeling about the procession to send off Consort Riishu.

The evidence for that was the pouch he carried. The pharmacy maiden had handed it to him. How to say it, he had thought that he won't get hurt so it wouldn't be needed.

He understood the Prince of the Moon was hiding something.

It wasn't beyond Basen's position to pursue that at all.

He wondered if there surely was something that personage had in mind.

Thus, *how to act in a situation where you don't know what will happen*, that was important.

It will take around two days to reach the villa by carriage.

The weather wasn't bad. Would be blazing sunlight be more of an issue rather?

The procession with the consort as its core proceeded slowly while taking breaks to not tire out the horses.

"Seems like we'll be lodging there tonight."

It was Rihaku who spoke to him.

Unlike Basen, the other man was on foot. Since he's tall and physically tough, Basen didn't need to look down from atop the horse.

"Aren't there other villages?"

What Basen inadvertently stated was that they couldn't find a place suitable in the rural village for the consort to stay overnight. The rows of houses look like dingy huts.

Wasn't this too poor?

"Seems there're only farming villages in the places midway. At any rate, it's terrible."

*It'd be nicer if they went along a more decent path, he thought. It's no different to camping then.*

"She'll be sleeping in the carriage," Rihaku said.

"...will she be okay?" Basen asked.

The carriages were certainly large, but the interior shouldn't be as large as a small room.

"She did the same thing when she went to the West, so it's not an issue." Rihaku grinned with a flash of his white teeth.

Should a nice guy be saying this? Rihaku was seven *sun* taller than Basen. Tanned skin and a sturdy physique. He had a sword strapped to his waist, but Basen heard that the man's speciality was a six-sided club.

*Is he skilled?*

That saying, they never sparred. *Would it be better if I spar with him once,* he wondered along those lines.

However, seeing how the consort wouldn't be staying at a lodge, Basen and the others will be camping.

If it was a single night, it wouldn't be much of an issue. They'll have to light a fire so wild dogs won't appear.

"Outside, you say. There are a lot of insects in this season," Rihaku grimaced. "I wonder if there are things that can burn to repel mosquitos in the area."

"Mosquitos, huh."

Certainly, Basen was against that.

Even if they light a fire, it's not like they won't get bitten at all.

Immediately he heard an unpleasant whine by his ears. He slapped it. There was a

squashed imprint of a mosquito stuck on his palm.

When he looked around, he saw paddy fields. It was probably teeming with mosquito larvae.

He could only grimace.



When they reached the village, the villagers greeted them simply. A deeply tanned elderly man had come to meet them.

Basen, who was only temporary, limited himself to a light greeting.

Since they'll be leaving first thing in the morning, they decided to sleep as soon as night came around.

Borrowing the fire from the village's stove, they treated themselves to a meal.

It can't be said the meal was extravagant. Only the warm congee and roasted meat that came out could be regarded as extravagant. However, the maids who were on Consort Riishu's side were blatantly complaining.

Uncultured.

Even if it was only temporary, people who serve a high ranking consort should have learnt etiquette—and yet they were complaining unreservedly. And then, speaking of what they did after, they immediately secluded themselves in the carriage.

*Oh dear*, Basen thought as he looked at the maids who were returning to the carriage.

“Ain't that strange?”

It was Rihaku who came up to him with a spoon in his mouth. There was roasted meat haphazardly piled on his bowl of congee.

“Those women should be looking after the consort's needs. Why are they secluding themselves in a different carriage?”

Hearing the question, Basen only felt a sense of unease.



“This isn’t a good thing to talk about,” he said.

It seemed as though the maids didn’t have confidence in Consort Riishu’s personal history. She had entered the current emperor’s inner palace while being the consort of the previous emperor. It was said that they were unable to stomach that part.

“Poor thing. I wonder if those maids would consider promoting their own consort,” the other man said.

Basen knew that the man called Rihaku boded no ill-will. However, Basen poured his congee into his mouth and chewed up the roast meat.

“Oh, you’re finished? Not drinking soup?” Rihaku asked.

“Yeah. I lost my appetite. You have my share if you want,” Basen answered.

He put away his bowl and went to look at his horse.

His horse was already fed. Basen brushed its mane.

“What’s with their attitude?”

He had heard about the rumours regarding Consort Riishu. He had investigated her since she might become his master’s, the Prince of the Moon’s, wife.

However, he didn’t hear any good things about those rumours.

A determined woman who had tried to serve two emperors.

Inferior to the other high ranking consorts.

An upstart maiden in essence.

Basen recalled the face of Consort Riishu that he had seen once.

A fragile maiden, she had been trembling violently.

She was so small that she would break with just a touch.

The inner palace was known as a flower garden. That wasn’t wrong. However, there are poisonous flowers within delicate flowers.

What kind of flower was Consort Riishu?

When he stroked the horse's back, he saw a lone maid come out of the consort's carriage.

"It's only that maid."

There was only a single maid around the consort who worked properly. Basen knew about that too.

He also understood the reason the Prince of the Moon was agonising over his thoughts. When his master acted at Eunuch Jinshi in the inner palace – it was occasional – but he had spoken to her. Normally, he would show a gloomy look on his lovely face, but he had displayed a somewhat crumbled expression before Basen.

Even after leaving the inner palace, it seemed as though he still had troubles.

The maid who came out of the carriage put down a bowl. Though a distance away, he saw that were leftovers inside. Perhaps it didn't match her palate, it seems she didn't eat much at all.

"Understandable, I guess."

With the suspicions of her infidelity laying heavy in her stomach, she was moving to the villa to be placed under house arrest. She must have a great burden in her mind to end her meal without eating everything.

Basen, hearing the annoying whine of mosquitos, waved his hand.

*Have they prepared the mosquito repellent?* he thought as he looked around. That moment a maid came out the carriage.

She was carrying a jar. It was releasing smoke.

Could this be the mosquito repellent?

The maid carried it to Consort Riishu's carriage.

It seems aside from the maid who brought and took away the meals just then, they did other work-like things. However, the only thing she carried over was the mosquito repellent fire.

Basen sniffed. Was it incense instead? It had a peculiar smell.

He left his brushed horse and decided to go back to where the other escorts were.



He heard the sound of a ground dove.

Was it midnight when he opened his eyes?

What was the sentry doing?

Basen surveyed his surroundings.

“!?”

Everyone was sleeping in a temporary tent, but no one was awake.  
The smoke of the bonfire was thick. His eyes teared up.

“Oi.”

He shook one of the guards who was sleeping in a nearby tent. He didn’t budge.  
What was happening?

Basen strapped his sword to his waist and peeked through the gap of the tent.  
None of the village houses had lighting.

Only the bonfire wavered. Winged insects burned up when they got too close.

A stretched shadow moved.  
The shadow came from the carriage side.

Something was happening.  
And the thing Basen should do in this current situation, was to guard the consort.  
He left the tent soundlessly. He moved while making sure his shadow doesn’t get lit by the fire.  
There were several men surrounding the carriage. It wasn’t Consort Riishu’s carriage, but the one that contained the maids and the belongings. For some reason, the men

seemed to be talking a single maid.

It was totally shady.

The men entered the cargo carriage.

Was there something there?

When Basen shrank back to hide, he felt a presence.

He flipped out his blade and slashed backwards.

“—, haha. Calm down a little.”

It was Rihaku, hands on the air and surrendering. The point of the blade had been thrust at his neck, stopping at the first layer of skin.

“Good thing I’m not alone.” Rihaku dropped his voice to a low whisper as he rubbed the red line on his neck with his finger.

“What’s happening?” Basen asked.

“Even if you ask. You must have thought that it was somewhat weird from the start, right? About the consort’s ritual.”

Basen nodded at Rihaku’s words. When he looked properly, he saw that the back of Rihaku’s hand was stained red.

“Seems the evening meal was drugged. As you see, I’m still kinda woozy.” Rihaku displayed the back of his hand. It seemed the red stain was a result of him stabbing himself to ward off drowsiness. “Master is fine. It must have been in the soup.”

“I see.”

Even if it was coincidental that he didn’t drink it, he had done his work.

Rihaku had drunk even the soup, but seeing how he’s awake now, the man must have anticipated this beforehand.

“Jinshi-sama’s command?” Basen asked.

“Correct,” Rihaku said as he rubbed his hand.

Basen felt his heart squeeze from that fact. For duties, there were also things that Basen didn't need to know. That's why he understood what the Prince of the Moon was keeping silent from him, but was it due to his inexperience that he felt vexed?

Basen glanced at the cargo carriage.

For some reason, people were gathering around the carriage that should only be containing baggage.

Consort Riishu wasn't their target?

“Is your actual command something else?” Basen asked.

“Astute,” Rihaku said.

The actual command was in the cargo carriage. The consort's travel was the coverup.

“I was told to protect that cargo carriage. There was also another person but... ahhh, how pitiful.”

They saw a figure collapsed by the side of the carriage. She looked like a maidservant, but she wasn't moving. It's hard to tell if she was alive or dead in this darkness.

“Is there something in that cargo carriage?” Basen asked.

“That's my job, Master,” Rihaku said as he licked the back of his hand.

“Are you going to fight against those numbers?”

“It'll be a little hard with that many, but it's not a problem.”

Rihaku had said it indifferently.

And then he looked at Basen. “What is your job?” he asked.

“...” Basen's job was to guard Consort Riishu.

If he couldn't handle the job he was told to do, he wasn't worth trust or anything.

Basen squeezed his fist. And then he looked at Rihaku who was licking his wound.

“Use this.”

He took out a pouch from his breast pocket and threw the styptic and bandages at the other man. He didn’t think it would be useful this soon.

“Thank you very much.” The nice guy grinned, then wrapped his hand with the bandages.

Basen put what’s left of the pouch in this breast pocket and headed for Consort Riishu’s carriage.



“It’s all your fault.”

When he approached the carriage, he heard a woman’s voice.

As far as he could see with the outfit illuminated by the bonfire, he understood her to be one of Consort Riishu’s maids.

“You assumed the rank of a high ranking consort that was beyond your position. It’s inevitable that I was always displeased.”

He couldn’t see the consort.

However, seeing how the maid was talking to someone—was the consort still awake, or was the maid talking to herself?

The only thing he understood was that the maid had betrayed Consort Riishu, and the people before had entered with her guidance.

What was this about?

With this, he also understood the reason Consort Riishu was assaulted by hoodlums in the middle of the street. Since there was an insider who had known about the consort’s entourage.

Basen looked at the wavering shadow. He could see another person beside the maid.

Amid the incense and the bonfire smoke, he perceived the characteristic smell of rust.

What was happening inside?

Was the consort safe?

Basen looked at the blade strapped at his waist. He unsheathed it, and silently hid behind the carriage wheels.

Dagger in hand, he then picked up a pebble. He slipped the jade ornament of the blade into his waistband.

He inhaled and exhaled.

Without making a sound. Just silently.

The highest priority was the protection of the consort.

Basen stood in the blind spot from the entrance of the carriage.

He threw the pebble inside.

*Clatter. Clatter.*

The pebble rolled across the floor of the carriage.

“Who is it!”

A man’s voice, then the floor creaking loudly.

A maid reacted in surprise, a small creaking sound.

She squeaked in fear at the man’s voice, and there was the sound of a body moving.

In that single instant, Basen categorised all the sounds.

Footsteps, and then a large shadow appeared before Basen. The man was around three *sun* taller than Basen, clad in dark clothing, perhaps to blend into the dead of the night. However, his move was very clumsy.

Basen slammed the back of his palm at the man’s chin. Spittle flew from the man’s mouth, however, his eyes were focused on Basen.

Too shallow, huh.

The man held the short sword across his eyes.

The same time the hair fell loosely, he stepped forward.

In the twinkling of an eye, Basen targeted the temples this time.

The man who received two palm strikes displayed the whites of his eyes, and collapsed. The chin and temples—both were suitable places to disorient someone. His first strike miscalculated the height difference of his opponent and the level difference of the carriage.

As he checked that the man's consciousness was out, Basen climbed into the carriage. As he expected, Consort Riishu and her head maid were inside. Together with the traitor maid who had been slandering her.

He covered the traitor's mouth and seized both her hands.

"Don't struggle. I don't want to be violent," he whispered in a muffled voice.

The trembling woman nodded.

Honestly, it would be troubling if she struggled.

It wasn't Basen's forte to lay his hand on women. Even so, he couldn't leave it as is.

He tied up the woman's hands with a cord he had brought with him. He unintentionally tied it too tightly; the maid gave a soft cry. He was sorry for that, but he didn't have the liberty to fuss about that sort of thing.

He glanced at the consort.

She was trembling as she tried to open her mouth.

Are you hurt? Were you scared?

The Prince of the Moon would be able to attend to her naturally, but not Basen.

He could only eliminate the sources of danger that threatened the consort, for even a little.

He tied up the maid, apprehended the fainted man, and went to Rihaku.



Removing the consort's threats—he should just think about that.

Trembling, the consort took out something from her bosom.

It seemed to be a hand towel. While scared, she presented it to Basen.

It was inevitable that she feared him. Even if he had helped her, he was the type of man who had tied up a woman even if she was a traitor.

Seeing the hand towel she presented, *what does she want to do*, he thought. Though the maid didn't have anything to cover her mouth.

Was that why she handed it to him?

"Thank you very much. It's the perfect length..."

The moment Basen was about to take it, the towel touched his cheek.

"...?"

"B-blood."

He had nearly mistaken her voice to a mosquito.

*Blood*, when he heard that word, Basen felt his cheek. Something red and slippery was flowing. He had cut the first layer of his skin. Looks like he failed to perceive everything just then.

It was Basen's bad habit. The pain was dull—particularly in these situations, he wouldn't feel it at all.

"...th-thank, you very much..." Consort Riishu forced out words as she trembled.

Feeling like his body got squeezed, Basen became extremely nervous.

Now wasn't the situation for it.

And yet his pulse was getting faster.

"—ngh!"

It seems he unintentionally strengthened to his hold over her mouth. The maid was pale.

“T-take this.”

It was Consort Riishu’s other maid who took care to bring a different towel. Basen rolled the towel into the traitor’s mouth.

He had to also tie up the other man.

However, with his heart thundering, he ended up tying the cord so tight he cut off the circulation to the man’s arms.

# Chapter 19

## Consort Riishu's Decision, Basen's Resolve

The total sum of people captured amounted to seven. The numbers included three of Consort Riishu's maids.

The three maids had served Consort Riishu prior to entering the inner palace. And the rest of the maids, even if they weren't present here, will also be kept under surveillance just in case.

The head maid was the only person who remained by Consort Riishu's side.

Basen clenched his fists.

Despite being a high ranking consort, Consort Riishu was only able to trust *one* subordinate.

And it was the unmistakable truth that it was those maids who had guided the hoodlums in.

The consort, trembling in spite of it all, kept her eyes on the apprehended maids.

"Here ya go, in the end, wasn't it Master who needed more?" Rihaku, who had ended the incident without any injury, returned the medicine Basen had given him just then. "That lass made this, right? It looks like she added painkillers too."

The self-inflicted injury on his hand was wrapped in bandages.

Basen scooped up the remaining medicine with his finger, and when he tried to apply it on the cut on his cheek, stopped.

He recalled the sensation of the towel on his cheek, and felt that he would erase that.

"What's wrong?" Rihaku asked.

"No, nothing at all." Basen rubbed the medicine on his finger onto his paper

handkerchief and returned the medicine to his breast pocket.

Then he looked at the apprehended men.

“What is their motive?” Basen looked at Rihaku with a sharp gaze.

“Can I not say it?” the other man asked.

“Not like you can hide it now.”

“You have a point.”

After saying that, Rihaku pointed to the cargo carriage the hoodlums had been going for. “Just take a glimpse. Don’t make a sound and do anything else. Can you come back after that?”

“...”

*“Can you come back?”*

With those emphasised words, Basen could only nod.

Before the cargo carriage, he could see the figure of the maidservant who had collapsed not long ago. She looked like she was cut, the bandages around her limbs looked painful, but her life didn’t seem to be in danger. She dipped her head at Basen.

What was there exactly?

He peered in from the carriage canopy.

The inside of the canopy was also covered by a curtain. He flipped it and looked inside.

There was something like looked like some cage.

It was large enough to fit a beast. There was a fur rug spread out beneath it.

It was a cage, and yet there was a rug; a somewhat mismatched impression. What kind of beast could be inside that?

That moment.

“My? Are you here to save me?”

He heard a woman’s voice.

Drab and delicate, a voice that invited a protective instinct.

He saw pure white threads. That spilt from the cage.

A pair of red specks, like ground tomato, shone amid the darkness.

“It’s fairly cramped here. Can you take me out to somewhere more spacious?”

When he saw the light that seemed to suck him in, Basen closed the curtain.

“Is that how it is?” Basen had an inexplicable feeling.

There was a young woman. She was shut up inside a beast’s cage.

It would probably be a maddening scene if it were the usual Basen.

However.

There was a reason for that inhumane act.

The reason Consort Riishu was purposely heading to the villa, the curious escorts deployed, the motives of the robbers—that was all right there.

“Lady Pai.”

The woman who stirred up trouble in the capital was there.



“Thank you for saving us.”

Thanking him once again, was not Consort Riishu but a messenger maid.

The consort’s face was veiled. She was entering the villa quietly.

The flowers of the inner palace rarely expose their bare face to outside men.

There was a modest palace in the villa. The servants who came for her were also dressed humbly.

In contrast to that, the fortified defence of the palace was strong. Basen found a number of familiar faces among the military officials.

The consort's escorts in this kind of place and all—it might be taken as a demotion by onlookers. And yet, no one looked dissatisfied at all.

That's right. The consort's escorts were all a cover. They were all assigned to a greater duty.

When he saw the consort's back, he wanted to run to stop her.

The moment he had inadvertently reached out, he felt something heavy prop onto his shoulder.

"You can't sympathise. It's an order that's been handed down," Rihaku said.

"What are you talking about?" Basen dropped his hand, feigning ignorance.

"Jinshi-sama told me. That there's nothing to criticise about your skill, but you do get a little emotional."

"...am I that undependable?"

Does Jinshi find this man more reliable than Basen who had been serving him ever since childhood?—the seeds of resentment sprouted in his heart.

"It's not that you're undependable, I think. My point being that right person at the right place thing, this is more-or-less a relation of seniority. Please take that as me playing that part."

Though he was speaking casually, the man called Rihaku didn't have any discomfort.

His mind was a lot more flexible than Basen who was known to be a straight-laced person.

"That consort will be entering this palace for the ritual now, but there's no telling when she will be returning, it seems."

“...the ritual was just in name, wasn’t it?” Basen said.

“Yeah, I think it might be more appropriate to call this place a nunnery instead.”

It was for this reason Lady Pai was brought to this place alongside the consort.

He felt resentful. It must have been the emperor’s decree to lock the two maidens who were a bother in the capital in the same place.

“How is this a good thing...?”

“...” Rihaku wordlessly stared at Basen.

He looked like he wanted to say something.

“What is it?” Basen asked.

“No, umm, I was thinking if I should say it.”

“Just let it out.”

Rihaku groaned, letting out a sigh of resignation as he looked up to the sky. “That consort, about this matter, it seems she had suggested it herself.”

“...what are you talking about!?”

Wasn’t she in the villa to cool the remaining heat from the suspicion of infidelity?

Rihaku leaned against the wall of the outer palace and crossed his arms. “Well, I’m not entirely sure, but I heard that she never matched with the atmosphere of the inner palace in the first place. It seems she also knew that she was surrounded by maids that weren’t very good, and so decided to move out this time in the form of a ritual – so to speak, it seems she’ll be retiring to religion.”

“Retiring to religion...”

Consort Riishu had become a nun once because she had been the consort of the previous emperor in the past.

“If she retires to religion for the second time, she wouldn’t be able to go out anymore,

so his majesty seemed to have read too much into it.”

Certainly, he heard that his majesty doted on Consort Riishu like a daughter. That was probably the exact reason the talks of marriage to the Prince of the Moon had been raised.

“It seems there were also talks of bestowal, but from the way things look, it might have been called off. I think the U clan wouldn’t be silent if it were true, but they seemed quiet lately.”

The U Clan was unable to flap their mouths loudly due to the incident Consort Riishu’s half-sister raised.

There was also no need to leave Consort Riishu as a high ranking consort as is. It was more so if the consort herself didn’t desire for it.

“...so you’re saying the consort chose the path of retiring to religion herself,” Basen remarked.

“While I’m at it, I’ll say that it was also under her consent to become the cover to transport Lady Pai,” Rihaku said.

“...why that too?” Basen vaguely realised the answer as he asked.

Was it for her father? For her family?

There was also the possibility of her being exposed to danger. And in truth, she was.

Was the maids’ betrayal because they were struggling against accompanying the consort to become nuns?

No, the consort was also assaulted by hoodlums before.

If the ones who had a hand in that were also the maids...

In Consort Riishu’s way of thinking, the best measure might have been to leave the inner palace.

Whether that was the right answer or not remains unknown.



Consort Riishu might not be able to leave this solemn villa hereafter.

Basen was severely downtrodden. Suddenly, when he realised, his fingers had stopped at the cut on his cheek.

“Why do you know so much about what’s behind the scenes? Did you hear that from Jinshi-sama as well?” he asked.

“No. My original station was close to Tactician-dono’s room,” Rihaku said with a strangely shocked expression.

The gossip-loving weirdo tactician would also appear anywhere with fruit juice in hand every time to gossip and get involved in them.

Which reminded Basen, all the escorts deployed here should be chosen by the weirdo tactician too.

“For the time being, your job is over with this. Shall we proceed?”

“Is it over?” Basen wondered what the consort on the other side of the wall was doing right now.

When Rihaku saw him like that, the man smiled wryly. “If the target of your affections is a courtesan, save money. Pay for her value, giving your all, without haggling the price. You can accomplish that, though.”

“What does this conversation have to do with courtesans?”

“A courtesan is probably a courtesan to Master, but to me, she is my beloved person,” Rihaku continued. “My way of obtaining the woman I love is through money, but what is it that for Master?”

“...”

“It’s not like a bestowal is settled with a single person, no?”

At the phrasing that somehow lit the coals under his feet, Basen felt uncomfortable. “Such emotions, for a c-consort. Moreover, there’s what the consort feels about me and all...”

“It’s nothing if there’s nothing. However, you’ll just be sending the consort to a life of a nun in this villa forever from now on.” Rihaku scratched the tip of his nose, “A man who achieves victories for my sake and comes for me, isn’t that already cool enough?”

Basen found himself wanting to swing his fist at Rihaku who was giving him a somewhat teasing smile.

The same time he wanted to swing, he wanted to treat him to a cup of wine.

His heart thundered.

Before he realised, Basen was standing at the front gate.

Consort Riishu’s back was no longer in sight.

He sucked in a deep breath.

“THANK YOU VERY MUCH! FOR THE TOWEL!”

The escorts were shocked

Even the military officials he recognised.

It was truly embarrassing. An act unbefitting of Basen.

But, he thought that he had to say something, anything.

Basen was unable to say pretentious lines with poise.

He couldn’t find words that would make nice women happy.

He could only honestly, straightforwardly, get it across.

His personality was that awkward.

Basen turned his heels, his face bright red.

With this, his job was done.

At this place where there were escorts he could trust, it would probably be fine if

anything happens here on after.

What Basen could do was to question the traitors and hoodlums they arrested.

To investigate their motives thoroughly, so the consort who lives in this villa can get a peace of mind.

For that, Basen had to return to the capital post haste.

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**Town 2 END**



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